

The Emperor Theophilos and the East, 829–842

COURT AND FRONTIER IN BYZANTIUM
DURING THE LAST PHASE OF ICONOCLASM

Juan Signes Codoñer



ROUTLEDGE

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The Emperor Theophilos and the East, 829–842

Court and Frontier in Byzantium during the
Last Phase of Iconoclasm

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Contents

<i>List of Maps and Figures</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xi</i>
Introduction	1
SECTION I: PROLEGOMENA TO A REIGN: INTERNAL CONFLICT IN THE EMPIRE UNDER LEO V AND MICHAEL II	
1	Back to Iconoclasm! 13
	1.1 Leo's Seizure of Power and the Re-establishment of Iconoclasm 13
	1.2 Iconoclasm in Anatolia 20
	1.3 Thomas' Icon Worship, and the Melkite Patriarch of Antioch 25
	1.4 The Iconoclasm of the Amorians 28
2	Unrest at the Eastern Border 33
	2.1 The Tourmarchai of the Phoideratoi 33
	2.2 The Outbreak of the War at the East 40
	2.3 An Army of Barbarians? 45
	2.4 Fracture in the Empire 52
SECTION II: THE ARMENIAN COURT	
3	Family Ties: Leo the Armenian and Michael of Amorion 63
	3.1 The Empress Thekla and the Family of Bardanes the Turk 63
	3.2 Michael's Conspiracy Against Leo 65
	3.3 The Execution of Leo's Murderers 68
4	Parties at the Court: The Armenian Marriage of Theophilos 73
	4.1 Dating the Marriage 73
	4.2 Theodora's Family 74
	4.3 John the Grammarian: Relatives and Influence 78
5	The Elusive Manuel the Armenian 83
	5.1 Why <i>Amalekites</i> ? 83
	5.2 Manuel's Service Under Michael I, Leo and Michael II 87
	5.3 Dating Manuel's Exile (I) 90
	5.4 The Akrites Manuel 94
	5.5 Dating Manuel's Exile (II) 99

6	The Daughter of Constantine VI and her Stepson	103
	6.1 Marrying a Nun to Obtain Legitimacy	103
	6.2 Euphrosyne's Banishment from the Palace and the Return of the "Armenian Party"	105
7	The Armenian Family Network	111
	7.1 Theophilos' Armenian Relatives	111
	7.2 Kaisar Alexios Mousele: His Career and Imperial Ambitions	115
8	Opposition to the Emperor	125
	8.1 Checking Aristocratic Resistance	125
	8.2 Manuel and Theophobos: Rivals or Targets of the "Romans"?	132

SECTION III: SUPPORTING THE PERSIAN UPRISING AGAINST THE ABBASIDS

9	Some Remarks on the Khurramite Movement	139
10	Naṣr the Khurramite	145
	10.1 The Literary Sources	145
	10.2 The Tourmarches of the Phoideratoi and the Persian Tourma	149
11	Theophobos and his Father	153
	11.1 Birth and Courtly Upbringing of a Noble Persian Youth	153
	11.2 The Identity of Theophobos' Father	161
	11.3 Theophobos Patrician and Kaisar and his Marriage to Theophilos' Family	164
	11.4 Theophobos Exousiastes of the Persians	168
12	A Persian Basileus?	173
	12.1 Dating the Uprising of the Persians	173
	12.2 Whose Usurpation Came First?	176

SECTION IV: WARFARE AGAINST THE ARABS

13	Invasion or Civil War? Thomas the Slav and the Arabs	183
	13.1 Thomas' Stay in the Caliphate and the Two Thomases	183
	13.2 Arab Troops in Thomas' Army	196
	13.3 The Arab Conquest of Crete	200
	13.4 The Strategy of the Caliph	208
14	Campaigning in Cilicia and Cappadocia in 830–833	215
	14.1 Ma'mūn's invasion of Cappadocia in 830	215
	14.2 Theophilos' First Triumph and his Campaign in Cilicia in 831	218

14.3	The Dating of Ma'mūn's Second Campaign in Cappadocia	224
14.4	The Fortress of Loulon	230
14.5	Exchange of Letters Between the Emperor and the Caliph, and Ma'mūn's Stay in Egypt	234
14.6	Some Conclusions on the Chronology of the Campaigns of 831–832	238
14.7	Ma'mūn's Third Campaign in Cappadocia in 833	241
15	Byzantine Expeditions in Western Armenia Between 834 and 836	245
15.1	Stephen of Taron on the Campaigns of Theophilos	246
15.2	The Abasgian Campaign and the Iberian Bagratids	250
15.3	The Armenian Bagratids	256
15.4	A Tentative Chronology for the Campaigns of the Years 834–837	257
15.5	The Supposed Attack of the Melitenians in 835	259
16	The Second Triumph of Theophilos in 837	263
16.1	Michael the Syrian on the Campaign of 837	263
16.2	Armenian Chroniclers on the Campaign of 837	270
17	Theophilos' Defeat at Anzes and the Capture of Amorion in 838	279
17.1	A Retaliatory Campaign for the Plundering of Sozopetra?	279
17.2	The Route Towards Amorion	287
17.3	The Treachery	293
17.4	Theophilos' Offer of Peace	297
17.5	An Assessment of the Amorion Campaign	304
18	After Amorion: Theophilos' Last Years	313
18.1	The Conspiracy of 'Abbās	313
18.2	Diplomacy in the West ...	316
18.3	... and War in the East	328

SECTION V: THE KHAZAR FLANK

19	The Embassy to the Khazars and the Building of Sarkel	337
19.1	The Dating of the Embassy of Petronas Kamateros (I)	337
19.2	Against Whom was Sarkel Built?	343
19.3	The Thema of the Klimata and the Province of Gotthia	345
20	Rus, Slavs and Bulgars in the Steppes	349
20.1	The Embassy of the Rus and the Dating of the Embassy of Petronas Kamateros (II)	349
20.2	When did the Khazars Convert to Judaism?	355
20.3	The Alliance of Theophilos with Bulgars and Slavs	362

SECTION VI: THE MELKITES

21	The Letter of the Three Melkite Patriarchs to Theophilos	367
	21.1 An Interpolated Text	367
	21.2 Patchwork in the Letter's Title and Protocol	371
	21.3 The Jerusalemite Synod of the Melkites	378
	21.4 The Unmentioned Icons in the Original Core of the Letter	384
	21.5 The Closing of the Letter	390
	21.6 Wishing Victory on the Emperor	394
	21.7 The Melkite Patriarchs after 843	399
	21.8 Where and by Whom was the Forgery Made?	405
22	Apocalyptic and Expectations of Political Change in the Realm of the Abbasids	409

SECTION VII: CULTURAL EXCHANGE WITH THE ARABS

23	Some Preliminary Matters	423
24	A Bidirectional Exchange?	429
	24.1 Byzantine Cultural Influence in the East	429
	24.2 The Road to Baghdad	439
	Epilogue The Image of Theophilos as a Ruler	449
	A Chronology of Theophilos' Reign	461
	<i>Abbreviations</i>	467
	<i>Sources</i>	469
	<i>Bibliography</i>	473
	<i>Index of Names and Places</i>	507

List of Maps and Figures

Maps

1	Peoples supposedly recruited into Thomas' army as mentioned by the Continuator and Genesisios	47
2	Routes of the campaigns of 830, 831, 832 and 833 with the names of the places involved	217
3	Byzantine expeditions in western Armenia between 834 and 836	249
4	Scheme of the campaign of Theophilos in the east in 837 according to Michael the Syrian	269
5	Campaign of Theophilos in the east in 837 according to the Armenian sources	273
6	Mu'taşım's campaign against Amorion in 838	288
7	Amorion, topographical site plan by S. Aydal. Courtesy of the Amorium Excavations Project.	295
8	West and central Mediterranean Sea, c. 838	322
9	Rus, Magyars and Khazars during the reign of Theophilos	345

Figures

1	Seal of Nasir, as <i>τουρμάρχης τῶν φοιδεράτων</i> , Zacos and Veglery (1972) vol. I.3, 1760, nos 3148a and b (present whereabouts unknown)	150
2	Seal of Theophobos as <i>patrikios</i> . Nr. 4 in the Dunn Catalogue (1983). The Henry Barber Trust Collection SL4, University of Birmingham, UK. Courtesy of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham	164
3	Seal of Theophobos as <i>ἐξουσιαστής τῶν Περασῶν</i> . Dumbarton Oaks DO 58.106.3767. © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington D.C.	169
4	Follis with Theophilos triumphant, holding <i>labarum</i> with cross in right hand, globe cruciger in left hand. Found in the Lower City Enclosure of Amorion, 2006. Courtesy of the Amorium Excavations Project.	277
5	Organ. Heron of Alexandria, <i>Pneumatica</i> I.42. After Schmidt 1899	446
6	Singing birds. Heron of Alexandria, <i>Pneumatica</i> II.5. After Schmidt 1899	447

- 7 The London Charioteer silk (detail), perhaps representing Theophilos as a charioteer. Victoria and Albert Museum T.762–1892. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Preface

In the summer semester of 1988 I attended a seminar on Theophanes Continuatus at the Freie Universität Berlin conducted by the late Professor Paul Speck. It was my first, abrupt introduction into the field of Byzantine Studies after my degree in Classical Philology at the University of Salamanca. I was at that time unaware that I was destined to work on this fascinating history of the second iconoclasm over the years that followed, until, under the stimulating direction of Professor Antonio Bravo García (Universidad Complutense of Madrid), in Salamanca in September 1993, I finally obtained my PhD with a comparative study of the first three books of the “Continuator” and the contemporary history of Genesisios. When my research was published two years later in Amsterdam (Signes Codoñer 1995), I stopped thinking about the text for several years and began working on other authors and periods, for it seemed to me that I needed to deepen my knowledge of Byzantine literature and historiography.

It was only after more than 10 years that I came back to the text in 2006 on the occasion of a summer research stay of three months at the University of Birmingham. There I met Leslie Brubaker and discussed with her the possibility of publishing a historical monograph on the emperor Theophilus based mostly on the evidence provided by the Continuator. She immediately welcomed my idea, so I submitted to her a draft of the project even before leaving Birmingham at the end of August. The plan was approved some weeks later by John Smedley of Ashgate Publishing. By then, during the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies held in London in 2006, I happened to meet Michael Featherstone (CNRS Paris), who had been charged with editing the first four books of Theophanes Continuatus for the Series Berolinensis of the Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae. He generously offered to share with me the editing of the text, on which we have been working since. This unexpected chance encouraged my research, for it offered me the opportunity to read the text intensively once again and thus appreciate better its structure and the working method of the anonymous author who composed it during the reign of Constantine VII.

My research, however, proceeded more slowly than I had initially imagined, especially because of the high number of complementary sources I needed to check (Greek, Arabic and Armenian) and the many secondary issues that needed to be dealt with. In order to consult bibliographies not available in Spain and also to exchange points of view with foreign colleagues, new research stays in Paris (2008), Oxford (2009, 2010) and Vienna (2010) were undertaken. I was even granted a sabbatical by the University of Valladolid for the academic year 2009–2010 to finish the work. I spent my leave mostly working at the Centro de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales of the CSIC in Madrid.

At the end of this process the book had grown into twice its original intended size, mostly because of the necessity of dealing with minute textual problems, which were not easy to tackle with passing references, but needed to be commented upon in some detail.

I relied on the assistance of many colleagues and friends whom I would like to mention here for their invaluable help. First of all, mention must be made of Michael Featherstone, my joint editor of the text, whose advice on many particular details always proved useful. The passages quoted from the “Continuator”, as well as the English translation, are taken from our common, still unpublished edition of the text. Other colleagues contributed to correcting errors in the original manuscript by reading the draft of some sections: John Haldon (Chapters 1 and 10), Timothy Greenwood (Chapters 15–16), Jonathan Shepard (Chapters 19–21), Joseph Munitiz (Chapter 21), Marie-France Auzépy (Chapter 21) and Otto Kresten (Chapter 21). Stephen Gero, James Howard Johnston, Chris Lightfoot, Pagona Papadopoulou and Mark Swanson, among others, also gave me their advice on many particular issues. Many others also helped me with bibliographical enquiries and petitions or just encouraged my work with their friendly support. On the financial side, the study has been made possible to a great extent by funding provided by the Spanish research project FFI2012-37908-C02-01. I must also especially thank Leslie Brubaker for the painstaking reading she made of the final draft of the book, polishing my deficient English at many points and thus producing a correct text.

Finally, Arantxa and Micaela made my life easier and more colourful during the long time it took for me to put my ideas in order. For the welcome pauses needed during research I dedicate this book to them.

A note on the transcription of names: I have transliterated Greek names except for those that are most common in English (Constantine, John, Gregory, Theodore, Peter, and also Nikaia, Cappadocia etc.). For the Arabic names I use diacritics according to the usual norms in English but avoid the article when at the beginning of the name. I apologize for minor inconsistencies.

Valladolid, April 2013

Introduction: Some Short Remarks on the Methodology and Purpose of the Book

The reign of Theophilos (829–842), the last iconoclast emperor, has always attracted historians of Byzantium, who tend to regard it as a crucial turning point in the history of the empire. However, the reasons for such an assessment are difficult to ascertain. Certainly, he enjoyed a relatively mild treatment in the iconophile sources, at least in contrast with the demeaning accounts of his iconoclastic forerunners, especially Leo III, Constantine V and Leo V. These same sources have preserved some family scenes of the emperor that render Theophilos' figure more humane and even enable us to draw an approximate profile of his character. A legendary halo of righteousness even surrounds Theophilos in some later accounts.

But when we try to be more specific about his achievements and leave aside any romanticism, we only find what seems to be a string of military defeats by the Arabs, interspersed with some minor triumphs, and a tenuous link with the origins of the so-called Byzantine Renaissance. Moreover, Theophilos' posthumous fame is usually connected with the good offices of his widow Theodora, who struggled to preserve the memory of her husband against the thirst for retaliation of many icon worshippers after 842 and, in order to achieve that, effectively managed her power as regent of her infant son Michael until 855. As the story goes, she promised to enforce a new religious policy of icon worship only in exchange for an official absolution by the Church of her late husband. Her attitude is quite understandable, as she was defending the continuity of the dynasty embodied by her son. Theodora knew what kind of propaganda could be levelled against dead emperors: the second Council of Nikaia had already launched a slanderous campaign against the iconoclast rulers of the eighth century, virtually effacing every positive trace of their reigns and branding them with infamous nicknames. Curiously enough, it was the iconophile Michael III and not his father Theophilos who was to be denigrated after his death in 867 by the official historiography of the new Macedonian dynasty and therefore depicted as a dissolute and incompetent drunkard.

Thus, most modern historiography has become accustomed to portraying Theophilos in a favourable light, taking at face value the legendary account that makes of him a righteous and learned ruler, and excusing as bad luck his apparent military failures against the Muslims. At least this is the attitude of the only current monograph about Theophilos, written by John H. Rosser in 1972 under the title *Theophilos the Unlucky (829/842): A Study of the Tragic and Brilliant Reign of Byzantium's last Iconoclastic Emperor*. This thesis, although not easily available, has influenced the approach of many scholars since then, because Rosser undertook

a thorough research of the sources and was able to build on them a consistent image of the emperor. Warren Treadgold in his popular book *The Byzantine Revival 780–842* accepts this overall pattern and speaks of “brilliance at home” and “brilliance abroad” when outlining the main events of his reign before the defeat of Amorion in 838 that is said to have triggered “Theophilos’ depression”. For Treadgold, Theophilos was also an “unlucky emperor”, and although he concedes that his good reputation was mostly an effect of his own propaganda, he states that “if Theophilos had reigned 50 more years, as was quite possible in view of his youth, he might well have become one of the greatest Byzantine rulers”.¹ In his final assessment of Theophilos’ career it does not matter apparently for Treadgold that his military record could be, “to put it charitably”, as he says, “disappointing”.

In spite of the great number of studies devoted to particular aspects of Theophilos’s reign, this contradictory assessment remains well established in modern research. There are however several reasons that commend a reappraisal of this image. The first has to do with the nature of the evidence. As a matter of fact, the positive evidence linking the origins of the Byzantine Renaissance with Theophilos is scanty, reduced in fact to the already mentioned legendary accounts and therefore highly controversial. And it is to be expected that it will remain so for the foreseeable future. Accordingly, Theophilos’ fame as patron of the arts and the sciences, no matter how probable, is mostly indirectly deduced through the historical context.

The opposite is the case when we try to assess the military abilities of the emperor, for we can now rely on a good number of sources. However, modern authors have in general tended to magnify the impact of the taking of the city of Amorion in 838 by caliph Mu‘taṣim, following closely the propaganda and detailed accounts of the Arabic sources as well as the tendentious narrative of later iconophile sources, which put the focus on the defeats of Theophilos in the battlefield in order to counteract the effects of the dynastic propaganda. One of our most important sources for Theophilos, the anonymous continuation of the chronicle of Theophanes written by order of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, provides the critics, so to say, with the slogan they needed, for he writes that “[Theophilos] carried off no fitting exploits in war, but was always defeated and returned in a manner unworthy of an emperor” (οὐδὲ τὰς ἐν πολέμοις ἀνδραγαθίας καταλλήλως ἐλάμβανεν, ἀλλ’ ἤττητό τε αἰεὶ καὶ οὐ κατὰ βασιλεία ὑπέστρεφεν).²

A more positive verdict is possible that will bring the military record into accord with the cultural achievements of Theophilos’ reign. This appears highly desirable and will probably account for the posthumous fame of the emperor, which could not be sustained just through dynastic propaganda. As a matter of fact, it appears that Theophilos’ prestige as a ruler could not be assured in the eyes of his contemporaries merely with a cultural programme, not even by showing himself incorruptible, accessible to his subjects or righteous in the law court. It is

¹ Treadgold (1988) 328.

² Theoph. Cont. III.2 (87.6–8).

to be doubted whether these attitudes could ever have mattered for the Byzantines if they were accompanied by permanent failure in the battlefield or a financial crisis. It is rather to be surmised that Theophilos, despite serious setbacks such as the defeat at Amorion in 838, effectively pushed back the Arab military threat and even won some reputation as an efficient ruler. It is upon this basis that his image must have been built.

Another reason for writing a new study on Theophilos has undoubtedly to do with the marked progress made in recent years in the knowledge of the sources and the protagonists of the history of ninth-century Byzantium. Friedhelm Winkelmann and his team of the Akademie der Wissenschaften in East Berlin during the DDR period were pioneers in attempting a thorough review and cataloguing of the available evidence, thus paving the way for later projects. Books like the *Quellenstudien zur herrschenden Klasse von Byzanz im 8. und 9. Jahrhundert* of 1987 or the *Quellen zur Geschichte des frühen Byzanz*³ remain essential references. It is upon this basis that the huge *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit (PmbZ)*, conducted and led by Ralph-Johannes Lilie, again at the Berliner Akademie, was made possible.⁴ The first part (“Erste Abteilung”) of this encyclopedia, covering the years 641 to 867, appeared between 1998 and 2001 in six volumes “nach Vorarbeiten F. Winkelmanns”. It not only provides an exhaustive register of every single source for every single person who played some role in the events of the time (be it an emperor or an anonymous person), but it also makes a critical assessment of the often contradictory evidence at hand, certainly with occasional slips, but always providing an honest and reliable interpretation of the facts. It should also be mentioned that the first volume of this vast enterprise, titled *Prolegomena*, contains a detailed study (“Quellenkunde”) of the sources according to their nature and genres, which includes also non-Greek texts and archeological material.

Simultaneously with the German *Prosopographie*, a parallel project appeared under the auspices of King’s College, London, the *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire I: (641–867) (PBE)* edited by Robert Martindale and covering exactly the same period.⁵ Although the English project is less detailed than the German, it remains nevertheless a very useful research tool, for it is published as an electronic database, which not only makes consultation and search easier but will also allow for permanent updating of the entries. Finally, scholars at the University of Birmingham produced an even more detailed register of the sources in a volume written by two of its leading academics in the field of Byzantine Studies, Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon.⁶ With the title *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca. 680–850): The Sources. An Annotated Survey*, this impressive study was conceived as the introduction to the comprehensive historical study of the iconoclast period

³ Winkelmann (1987), Winkelmann and Brandes (1990).

⁴ Lilie et al. (1998–2001).

⁵ Martindale (2001). The project is already mentioned in *PmbZ* vol. 1, 304–9.

⁶ Brubaker and Haldon (2001).

that appeared in 2011⁷ and that has as its two main foci the socioeconomic history and material culture, in clear contrast to the more political approach of previous work on the period.

All these publications and others of a more limited focus but no less encyclopaedic nature⁸ have thus provided scholars with tools and data that enable a more accurate appraisal of the evidence. However, at the same time, they raise the bar for future research and make it more difficult to present new results. In view of the large amount of evidence now available, it is therefore advisable to reduce the scope of any new study on the period in order to gain a deeper insight into the problems involved: overviews over a long period are possible only after decades of research and mostly conceivable only on a team basis. The main reason for this is that we can no longer take the sources as “medieval databases”, as was necessarily the case before these new vast projects appeared, when scholars invested most of their time struggling with texts in search of substantive data. Now that the data as well as the sources that convey them are known, something more is needed. This is mainly a more careful approach to the texts that must consider the aims and scope of their authors, the sources they used or the literary codes that unavoidably determined their task. New information will appear mainly by taking these aspects into account.

Curiously enough, this approach has been relatively neglected by historians of the iconoclast period. A first symptom of this is that the most detailed historical writings that cover the reign of Theophilos, such as the chronicles of the *Logothete* group and the *Continuator of Theophanes*, are still waiting for a critical edition.⁹ This neglect extends also to many hagiographies of the period, which remain badly edited, not to speak of dozens of minor sources. Consequently, not many monographs on single works of the period have appeared in recent times, in contrast to the constant appearance of new studies on Byzantine texts before the Muslim invasion or from the eleventh century onwards. However, there are obviously exceptions to this general rule, personified mainly by the late Paul Speck and more recently by Marie-France Auzépy, who represent two different methodologies. Both have contributed in their way to disentangling the thicket of fragmentary and biased reports produced by the iconophiles, which obscured to

⁷ Brubaker and Haldon (2011).

⁸ See for instance Settapani (2006) for the Armenian prosopography; Thomas and Roggema (2009) for the Christian Arabic sources and the interaction of Islam and orthodoxy, or <http://www.doaks.org/document/hagiointro.pdf> for the Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography Database. For the Arabic sources Vasiliev (1935), (1950) remains unsurpassed.

⁹ Wahlgren (2006) has edited up to now only Version A of the *Logothete*, but his edition of Version B and Pseudo-Symeon are still to come. Michael Featherstone and I have completed the edition of the *Continuator* for the *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*, so I have been able to profit from it for the references to this text, although the printed version will probably appear later than the present book.

a great extent the eventual achievements of the iconoclast emperors. It is perhaps worth commenting briefly on their work.

Before Speck, modern historians had always avoided paying too much attention to the most evident pieces of slander against iconoclasts produced by the iconophiles, as their partiality was blatant. However, as the scholars did not have an alternative version for the events, in the end they became somewhat resigned and endorsed the general assessment of cultural and economic decay that the iconophile propaganda had produced for the long century before the “restoration” of icon worship in 843. Legends like the burning of the university at the time of Leo III or even the pact of this same emperor with a Jew to start the persecution of icons were repeated in the manuals,¹⁰ albeit with a sense of distaste and weariness, as if these naive stories somehow reflected the general atmosphere of decadence the iconophiles were denouncing.

Speck began scrutinizing one by one the pieces of the puzzle, and consequently submitted many single texts to a painstaking analysis, revealing the patchwork character of many compositions, the final result of a complex transmission process. He detected inconsistencies and a random combination of sources, and tried to reconstruct out of them the iconoclast perspective. He also proved that there were a good number of forgeries behind many of the texts concerning the iconoclast controversy. The iconophiles were in fact already used to altering or interpolating pro-iconoclastic texts between 787 and 815 and then again after 843, in order to hide or alter their original message. Nevertheless, they often worked clumsily, not being able to erase all traces of the original intent of the work. After Speck’s research, many legends and stories now found an historical explanation.

However, Speck suspected more interpolations and forgeries than was certainly the case and occasionally went too far in his minute reconstruction of the original texts, which was mainly hypothetical and unwarranted. Although his intuitions were frequently sound,¹¹ his attempt to reconstruct in every single detail the original wording of the text under consideration was sometimes excessive and based on a chain of *petitiones principii*, whose accumulation made the whole building tremble.¹² His preconception of what the text was supposed to say (mostly guided by his vindication of iconoclast emperors against iconophile propaganda) in fact determined his analysis, which in many instances ignored the authorial intention and dismembered the text into a disparate series of textual fragments. The shortcomings of this procedure had already been denounced by

¹⁰ See now Speck (1974a) for the legend about the burning of the University of Constantinople and its decay in the iconoclastic period and Speck (1990) for the legend of the Jew who promised Leo III a long reign if he forbade icon worship.

¹¹ See for example Speck (1984b), (1987) and (1998).

¹² The methodology is questionable, for instance, in Speck (1988) and (2002). See Chapter 21 of this volume for a comment on Speck’s analysis of the *Letter to Theophilos*.

Jakov Ljubarskij in some of his publications, where he defended the personality of the author against the abuses of a more mechanical *Quellenforschung*.¹³

A much more careful and prudent approach to the texts was needed, such as that offered by Marie-France Auzépy during the last 15 years.¹⁴ Instead of explaining out problematic data in texts by means of chance transmission and ad hoc hypothesis, Auzépy closely scrutinizes the overall structure of the texts under review and detects minor inconsistencies in order to prove their composite nature. She avoids an exact explanation for every single problem she detects, but convincingly finds a more likely historical and cultural context for the work under review. She does not ignore the *Quellenforschung*, but recognizes the importance of the author as well.

It is this middle way that we aim to follow in the present work when dealing with pieces of evidence taken from the sources. Now, as we are not writing a succession of monographic studies on single sources (as most of Auzépy's studies are), but aim to reconstruct a period out of them (as was Speck's main purpose), it is our duty to obtain a coherent picture from disparate sources, which can certainly be regarded as contradicting the philological method. However, being conscious of that, we will try not to sacrifice or to force into the overall picture the partial conclusions obtained through the detailed analysis of the texts, thus admitting exceptions and alternative explanations to our interpretation. As a consequence, our assessment of the period will be less evident or, so to speak, more contradictory, but it will be richer and, we hope, closer to the complex reality of the empire. That our conclusions will be perhaps more open to debate is not necessarily a deficiency of this method.

On the other hand, since we aim at making a partial historical account of Theophilos' reign out of a relatively large number of sources, we will evidently not be able to provide a philological analysis of all them when assessing the evidence they bear. However, we will try at least to consider the context and intention of the evidence given by the most important sources of the period, namely the histories of Genesis and the Continuator of Theophanes, both written in the tenth century during the reign of Constantine VII and at his request.¹⁵ Also important will be works such as the *Annals* of Ṭabarī, the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian and the famous *Letter to Theophilos* of the three Melkite patriarchs, which will be the main focus of analysis in separate chapters or sections of the book.¹⁶

These works, along with some other minor texts, will be quoted in the following pages of this book and their accounts will provide more often than not the starting

¹³ See especially Ljubarskij (1992), (1998). See also Mullett (1992).

¹⁴ Auzépy (1997), (1999) and her collection of articles (2007).

¹⁵ For the relationship between these two works see Signes Codoñer (1995).

¹⁶ For Ṭabarī and Michael the Syrian see especially Chapters 14–19. For Islamic historiography see for instance Hibri (1999) and Robinson (2003). A good introduction to the work of Michael is made by Weltecke (1997). For the *Letter to Theophilos* see Chapter 26 and Speck (1990) 449–534, Gauer (1994), Munitiz, Chrysostomides, Harvalia-Crook and Dendrinou (1997).

point for the discussion. My method will be the opposite of that followed by Treadgold in his influential book quoted above, *The Byzantine Revival*: instead of building a coherent narrative out of the data taken from the sources and relegating to lengthy footnotes the discussion of the textual problems, I have preferred to put the textual discussion into the main text (making of it the core of the book) and relegating the historical conclusions to the end of the corresponding chapter or section.¹⁷ This obviously makes reading more difficult for the average reader in search of a coherent narrative of the period, but in exchange it provides a faithful picture of the process by which the conclusions are gained. The reader can thus easily check the arguments at stake for every single passage and eventually refute them if unconvincing.

Moreover, the fact that I have always tried to let the sources speak for themselves before proceeding to discuss the historicity of their accounts has the advantage of preventing a good deal of unfounded speculation, because the arguments thus remain closely bound to the texts that trigger the discussion. In fact, the permanent reference to the sources obliges one to take them seriously and not to discredit too quickly the information they furnish if it does not tally with our particular reconstruction of the events: in those cases we must do our best to look for some likely cause for the distorting version offered by a given source and not to consider it just fanciful or legendary for no particular reason, as has too often been the case in modern research when approaching Byzantine sources. This, I concede, is a difficult task, for it frequently occurs that no apparent reason for a problematic statement emerges after a first reading. However, this book attempts to centre the discussion in the internal logic of the sources and not only in the logic of the scholar at work. It is my hope that the narrative of the discussion process, however technical it may be, may nevertheless appeal to readers, especially if I succeed in exposing the chain of facts according to their natural order and the relevance of the sources. Obviously if the conclusions turn out to be sound, or at least likely, the effort will have been worth it.

This procedure of presenting and discussing the sources before coming to any conclusions takes more space than usual in books on Byzantine history, the consequence logically being a book bulkier than I initially wished. This circumstance has forced a selection of topics, because a comprehensive monograph on Theophilos would have undoubtedly surpassed my own abilities and turned out to be unrealistic. So I decided to leave out of my research essential aspects of Theophilos' reign, such as administration and economy (which obviously need a broader perspective, like the one attempted in the recent book of Brubaker and Haldon),¹⁸ but also the diplomatic exchanges with the Latin powers, the military campaigns in the west (from the Danube frontier to Sicily), not to mention the iconoclastic controversy within the frontiers of the empire or the building activity of the emperor (mainly attested in the

¹⁷ It is for this reason that I have reduced to a minimum the bibliographical references in the footnotes.

¹⁸ Brubaker and Haldon (2011).

capital), among many other topics. Instead, I put the lens on the relationship of the empire under Theophilos with its eastern neighbours, be they Armenians, Persians, Arabs or even Khazars. The arrangement of the subject matter is, however, neither purely thematic (according to the nations involved) nor chronological, but combines both factors and perhaps requires some explanation.

The revival of iconoclasm under Leo the Armenian and Michael of Amorion, both soldiers of the eastern frontier, as well as the regional tensions between westerners and easterners as expressed mainly during the so-called civil war of Thomas the Slav, will be the focus of Section I of the study, for it is against this background that many of the events during Theophilos' reign are better understood. Theophilos' interest in the east is also explained through the dominance of Armenians at the court, an aspect that links his reign with that of his predecessor Leo the Armenian (Theophilos saw himself as an avenger of his assassination) rather than with his father Michael. The evidence collected will allow a detailed prosopographical analysis of some of the most conspicuous agents of power at the time, such as Manuel the Armenian or John the Grammarian (see Section II). Again, the recruitment of Persians in the army since 833 was evidently a countermeasure to check Abbasid aggressive campaigns in Anatolia (even since the time of Thomas's usurpation), but also explains further the development of later campaigns. It had internal consequences for the emperor (the usurpation of the Persian Theophobos) that are also worth considering (see Section III).

That eastern policy was a priority for the empire during Theophilos' reign was in the first instance a consequence of the threat posed by the Abbasids, since the caliph Ma'mūn and his brother Mu'taṣim took the field as many as four times against the empire and caused Theophilos in turn to react by personally leading several campaigns beyond the eastern borders of Byzantine Anatolia, some of them quite successful. The review and assessment of the main sources for these military actions understandably constitute the longest section of the book and will allow for a somehow improved and more detailed sequence of the events. There, attention will also be paid to the war between Michael and Thomas (820–823), which was a turning point in the permanent crisis between the two rival powers, since it was in fact triggered by the personal involvement of Ma'mūn in Thomas's usurpation (see Section IV).

The strategic importance of the Khazars, one of the main economic powers in the Russian steppes and an important commercial partner of the Abbasid caliphate, explains the renewed interest of the Byzantines in an alliance with them, which, contrary to current chronology, is to be set at the beginning of Theophilos' reign. The shift to the Rus took place only towards 838 (see Section V).

The following section will explore the aim of the appeal addressed by the Melkite patriarchs to Theophilos in 836 as put forward in the so-called *Letter to Theophilos*, a rather problematic text that has been the subject of much controversy. Despite the current opinion that the Melkites were at the time fervent partisans of icon worship, we will explore the possibility that they could have tried to come to an agreement with the emperor as a result of the recent military victories of

Theophilos in the eastern border and of the apocalyptic prophecies that circulated at the time and announced an impending end of the Abbasid caliphate (Section VI).

Next, the cultural exchanges with the Arabs, the so-called “road to Baghdad”, will be our focus, for the origins of the Byzantine revival of the ninth century are not to be explained without the contribution of the Abbasid philhellenism, however this phenomenon may be assessed (Section VII). Finally, we will try to balance Theophilos’ eastern policy against his image as a righteous ruler as advanced in contemporary or later sources (see the Epilogue).

A new chronology of many of the events of Theophilos’ reign, made possible only after painstaking analysis of the sources discussed throughout this book, is included in an appendix at the end of the study.

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SECTION I

Prolegomena to a Reign: Internal Conflict in the Empire under Leo V and Michael II

It seems inappropriate to examine Theophilos' reign without taking a look back into some aspects of the policy of his two iconoclastic predecessors, his godfather Leo V the Armenian (813–820) and his father Michael II of Amorion (820–829). It is not only a matter of explaining Theophilos' personal relation with both of them, the continuous and significant presence of Armenians at the imperial court since Leo's reign (see Chapters 3–8), or even the responsibilities Theophilos had as young co-emperor after he was crowned by his father in 821 (see Chapter 4.1). It is also to some momentous events in the reigns of Leo V and Michael II that we will now direct our attention, for they will help us to understand conflicts that later escalated or manifested themselves under Theophilos. These insights will provide, so I hope, a valuable background for explaining some aspects of Theophilos' eastern policy that constitute the main focus of the present research. We will address first the causes of the return to iconoclasm under Leo. Thus we will consider briefly whether the renewed hostility towards icon worship could be linked with the eastern origins of the emperor and even whether Thomas's uprising against Leo and Michael II was somehow triggered by the conflict over images (Chapter 1). Then we shall explore the regional tensions between the eastern and the western parts of the empire, and, more specifically, the role played by some nations and peoples beyond the Byzantine eastern frontier, who either enrolled as "federates" in the army or, alternatively, supported the usurpation of Thomas (Chapter 2).

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Chapter 1

Back to Iconoclasm!

1.1 Leo's Seizure of Power and the Re-establishment of Iconoclasm

When in 813 Michael Rhangabe was defeated in a pitched battle in Versinikia by the khan Krum, he fled hastily back to the capital with the remaining troops, closely followed by the Bulgarian army. We know about the immediately ensuing events mainly through the chronicle of the contemporary iconophile monk Theophanes. According to him, Michael consulted Leo, “patrician and commander of the Eastern army”, described as “pious, strenuous and resolved to any course of action” (εὐσεβεῖ καὶ ἀνδρειοτάτῳ καὶ κατὰ πάντα πεπονημένῳ), about the measures to be taken to defend the empire. Leo, the narrative goes, remained with the thematic army outside the walls of Constantinople whereas the emperor entered the city. Michael apparently wanted to abdicate and the patriarch Nikephoros was also counselling him to leave, but his wife and some members of his staff prevented him from accomplishing his will. However, when the generals and the population of Constantinople heard about the emperor’s flight, they pushed Leo “to assume the government of the Christian state”. Leo, Theophanes claims, was reluctant to make this move, for the situation was very difficult and “he preserved himself true and loyal to the reigning emperors” (ἑαυτὸν πρὸς τοὺς βασιλεύοντας φυλάττων ὀρθὸν καὶ ἀνεπίβουλον). But, as the enemy appeared before the city, Leo wrote to the patriarch Nikephoros, “giving him assurance of his orthodoxy” (τὰ περὶ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ὀρθοδοξίας διαβεβαιούμενος) and asking him for his approval to seize power. He was then proclaimed “most lawful emperor of the Romans” (ἐννομώτατος βασιλεὺς Ῥωμαίων) before the walls of the city, and, after entering it, was crowned by Nikephoros in Hagia Sophia.¹

There follow some lines describing the siege of the city by Krum and the failed attempt of Leo to kill him in an ambush. Theophanes next describes how Krum raided and burnt the palace of St. Mamas and, after besieging and taking Adrianopolis, returned home. Then the chronicle ends abruptly. Theophanes avoids giving details of the devastation caused by the Bulgarians in the suburban area of the capital and in neighbouring Thrace, accurately described in the contemporary chronicle of the *Scriptor Incertus*,² who intersperses his account with repeated allusions to the inactivity of Leo.³ Particularly serious was the taking of the populous Adrianopolis, whose inhabitants Krum deported to the north of the Danube, where they remained

¹ Theoph. 502–503 (AM 6305).

² *Scrip. Inc.* 344.4–347.11.

³ *Scrip. Inc.* 346.1.2: ὁ Λέων τῆς πόλεως οὐκ ἐξῆλθεν; 346.22: οὐδὲ τῆς πόλεως ἐξῆλθεν; 347.9–10: οὔτε αὐτὸς ἐξῆλθεν τῆς πόλεως.

until the reign of Theophilos.⁴ But Theophanes mentions it only in passing, in the very last sentence of his work. Did he feel uncomfortable by then with the course of events?

In any case, it was only the sudden death of Krum on 14 April 814, while he was preparing a final assault against Constantinople, that put a provisory end to the Bulgarian offensive.⁵ Leo then appointed a committee in the imperial palace apparently to compile an iconoclastic *florilegium*, which would lend support to his iconoclastic views. The clash with the icon worshippers and patriarch Nikephoros took place in December 814 and ended with the deposition of patriarch Nikephoros on the first day of Lent 815 and the summoning of an iconoclastic council by the new patriarch Theodotos after Easter.⁶

Theophanes probably wrote the final section of his chronicle before the death of Krum, for he does not mention this event at all, although it could have made a good conclusion to his work. Moreover, Theophanes certainly completed his narrative before the end of 814, when Leo assembled an iconoclastic committee at the imperial palace and thus resumed a policy against icon worship. After that date, Leo could not have been described as orthodox by the iconophile chronicler, who rallied support against the iconoclasts and was exiled alongside Nikephoros by the same emperor whom they had supported in 813. It is natural to infer that both men already felt utterly disappointed by Leo in 815.⁷

However, we must not necessarily follow the iconophile sources of the ninth century, which depict the promotion of iconoclasm by Leo since 814 as proof of his hypocrisy and deceitfulness, as if the emperor had always been an adherent of iconoclasm and “seized the very next opportunity to initiate an iconoclastic program”⁸ after Krum and the Bulgarians were defeated. Could it also be that Leo was in fact a trustworthy and faithful adherent of Michael and a pious icon worshipper, as Theophanes depicted him in his chronicle? We enter here the realm of conjecture, for nobody can be sure of an emperor’s personal or religious feelings and sympathies, especially if he had no Michael Psellos at his side to depict his character. But we must not take it for granted that the emperor was always a disguised iconoclast who kept concealed from all his true intention to restore iconoclasm before he gained power. Why not suppose that the support he gave to the iconoclasts since 814 was not a result of his personal stance but of the circumstances of power? Has not pragmatism always been one of the main

⁴ See Chapter 20.1 for the return of the Byzantine exiles during the reign of Theophilos. For the war against Krum in Leo’s reign, see Sophoulis (2012) 245–64.

⁵ For more details about the beginning of Leo’s reign see Treadgold (1988) 200–214.

⁶ Alexander (1958) 111–35.

⁷ Mango and Scott (1997) LVI–LVII. It is to be taken into account that Theophanes may not have written in person the final section of the chronicle, for he contracted kidney disease in 809–810 and was bedridden to the end of his life. On the other hand, if his chronicle, hostile to iconoclasm, could not have been published before 842, it remains unexplained why its final section was not modified by then. For that see again Mango and Scott (1997) LXI–LXII.

⁸ Alexander (1958) 126.

motives behind every ruler's decision, as when Henry IV of France converted to Catholicism in 1593 in order to preserve his throne? As Brubaker and Haldon put it, "we should not assume that pragmatism and ideological conviction are somehow mutually exclusive".⁹ Let us explore the possibility that Leo was not the furious iconoclast depicted by iconophile propaganda. This can eventually shed some light on his tragic end and the ensuing war that divided the empire into two halves.

Michael was a fervid adherent of icon worship and also probably responsible for dismissing many of Nikephoros' soldiers because of their iconoclastic leanings.¹⁰ But Leo, whom Nikephoros had banished after 808 for taking part in Arsaber's uprising, was released by Michael from his exile and enrolled amongst the staff-bearers of the palace before being appointed general of the Anatolikai.¹¹ Perhaps Leo artfully concealed his true religious feelings in order to make progress through the army, but it is also conceivable that he earned his post not only for his military competence but also for other personal qualities the pious Michael Rhangabe appreciated in the men of his entourage.

Moreover, if we consider Leo's family entourage, we find many icon worshippers among them, who even corresponded with the Stoudites. As we will see in Chapter 3, Leo was closely related to the family of Bardanes the Turk, whose members all seem to be iconophiles. Bardanes's daughter and Leo's cousin Eirene had a close relationship with Theodore Stoudites, as did also the sister of the empress Theodosia, the protospatharia Albaneka. A Stoudite monk was sent to negotiate the surrender to Michael II of Gregory Pterotos, cousin of Leo, during the civil war.¹² Leo's own wife Theodosia returned to icon worship after Leo's death, as revealed in a letter from Theodore Stoudites.¹³ One or even two of Leo's sons were tonsured as monks after the fall of their father and were remembered for their orthodoxy and piety to the point that their candidature for the patriarchate was even taken into consideration after icon worship was restored.¹⁴ Finally, Leo's own mother supposedly tried to convince her son to abandon iconoclasm.¹⁵

It is also significant that when Leo sought supporters in his seizure of power, he did not limit himself to the generals and the mob, which, according to Theophanes, urged him to lead the empire, but gave to patriarch Nikephoros guarantees of his orthodoxy.¹⁶ These guarantees must not be taken as evidence of the mistrust Leo

⁹ For a recent and appealing overview of the causes that led Leo V back to iconoclasm see Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 366–72 and 382–4, where they consider a variety of complementary factors.

¹⁰ According to the plausible interpretation of Alexander (1958) 114–22.

¹¹ Th. Cont. I.4 (11.3–12.14).

¹² Turner (1990) 186.

¹³ Theod. Stoud., *Letters*, nr. 538.

¹⁴ Th. Cont. II.1 (41.1–2) and Gen. IV.18 (70.90–71.71.3).

¹⁵ Th. Cont. I.23 (36.12–37.3).

¹⁶ This version is supported by the *Scrip. Inc.* 340.15–341.3, where it is said that Leo signed this written pledge of orthodoxy *before* his crowning: πρότερον ποιήσας ἰδιόχειρον μετὰ τῶν σὺν αὐτῷ μηδέποτε κατὰ τῆς ἐκκλησίας γενέσθαι ἢ παρασαλεύσαι τι τῶν καλῶς

inspired in the ecclesiastical authorities of the time. On the contrary, since the pious Michael gave these same guarantees to patriarch Nikephoros, it seems that Leo was probably following here his example in order to gain the support of the patriarch at a moment of crisis. Nikephoros was certainly not only a strong personality but also an important ally, whose active backing Leo urgently needed to assure his power.

There is no reason to suppose that Leo signed half-heartedly the written pledge of orthodoxy or that he concealed his real iconoclastic feelings from the patriarch for tactical reasons. The *Scriptor Incertus* accuses Leo of being a liar for not having respected his written oath (ὅπερ οὐκ ἐφύλαξεν ψευστῆς ὧν) and a chameleon (χαμαιλέοντα) for having changed his mind.¹⁷ The first point suggests that Leo lied when he signed the pledge of orthodoxy, but this appears to be just an inference made from the undisputed fact of his later adherence to iconoclasm. More revealing is his comparison with a chameleon, for it implies that Leo changed and adapted to circumstances.¹⁸

In the *Life of Nikephoros* it is stated that when Leo was proclaimed emperor by the troops, Nikephoros demanded that he sign a confession of faith, but the emperor postponed its signing until after his coronation and then refused to do so.¹⁹ Such a refusal by Leo not only contradicts the version of Theophanes and the *Scriptor incertus*, closer to the events, but appears highly unlikely, for Leo could not risk provoking Nikephoros on the eve of his crowning. Moreover, Theophanes would have noticed the refusal at such a critical moment. This version of events was probably concocted by the patriarch after his exile in order to prove Leo's duplicity and justify his initial support of the emperor.²⁰ If Leo ever refused to sign a τόμος of orthodoxy sent by the patriarch, it would be long after his coronation when he started his iconoclastic policy. There is therefore no reason to reconcile both versions.²¹

εἰς αὐτὴν ὀρισθέντων ὑπὸ τῶν ἁγίων πατέρων ἱερῶν δογμάτων. See also Log. (A) *Leon V* [128] 1 (210.3–4): στεφθεῖς ὑπὸ Νικηφόρου πατριάρχου, βεβαιώσας αὐτὸν ἐγγράφως περὶ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ὀρθοδοξίας.

¹⁷ *Scrip. Inc.* 341.3–7.

¹⁸ Georg. Mon. 781.23 compares Leo again with a chameleon, but this time he stresses the duplicity and deceitfulness of the emperor. For the slanderous epithets given to Leo by iconophile sources see Signes Codoñer (1994) 362–6.

¹⁹ Ignatios, *Life of Nikephoros* 163.26–164.7. Th. Cont. I.17 (29.2–7) and Gen. I.22 (20.2–9) are clearly dependent on this passage.

²⁰ Turner (1990) 197–200, Signes Codoñer (1995) 130 and Pratsch (1999a) 131. In Signes Codoñer (2002) 392–3 I wrongly concluded that Leo could never have yielded to the demands of the patriarch.

²¹ Bury (1912) 56–57 and Treadgold (1988) 199 and note 266 try to reconcile both versions considering that Leo first sent a written confession of faith to Nikephoros but refused later to sign a prepared statement of orthodoxy brought to him by a delegation of bishops before the crowning in the name of the patriarch. No single source refers to two different pledges of faith.

It thus appears that Leo began his reign as an orthodox iconophile but later changed his mind and re-established iconoclasm.²² Why did he change at all? There were of course practical considerations in his decision to revert to iconoclasm, for victory against the enemy was usually considered a clear sign of the legitimacy of the creed. The victories of the Isaurian emperors and their long reigns are mentioned again and again in the sources as a motive behind Leo's decision, taken after the sudden death of Krum.²³ However, it would be wrong to infer that this was a personal decision, based on religious doubts or self-imposed questions.²⁴ In fact, these sources refer to various stories where persons of Leo's entourage develop different strategies (including prophecies) for pushing the emperor to ban icons. John the Grammarian figures prominently among them. These names, however, tell us little about the sectors of the population or the administration that eventually forced a comeback of iconoclasm. The circumstances of the first months of Leo's government shed some light on the process.

With the capital surrounded by the hostile forces of the Bulgarians, the army and the populace turned out to be the main support for Leo. The iconoclast soldiers, who had opened Constantine V's grave during the Balkan campaign of Michael Rhangabe in order to plead for his help,²⁵ probably continued to stir unrest in the capital with the understanding, if not the help, of a part of the population, maybe traders and the *demoi* of the hippodrome.²⁶ As Thomas Pratsch has proved, some senators were also among the first supporters of Leo's return to iconoclasm.²⁷ This may explain why the population cried from the city walls "the cross has won" when they saw Krum fleeing on horseback after having been attacked in an ambush prepared by the Byzantines during a parley held before them.²⁸ Again, that Leo crowned his son Symbatios with the name of Constantine on 25 December 813, when the Bulgarian threat was already present, was surely a first concession to the partisans of the Isaurian dynasty, most probably soldiers who were longing for a revival of past victories.²⁹ But it did not necessarily mean at the time a first step

²² Contrary to Treadgold (1988) 199, who thinks that "From the start Leo was thinking of reintroducing Iconoclasm." This has some consequences for assessing the personality of Theophilos himself, as Leo was Theophilos' godfather before he came to power in 813. This explains the reasons Theophilos had for punishing Leo's murders. As we shall see in Chapter 3.2, no source connects this measure with the iconoclast controversy.

²³ *Scrip. Inc.* 349.1–18, Th. Cont. I.15–16 (26.9–28.15) and Gen. I.13 (10.20–11.59).

²⁴ See Treadgold (1988) 207–8 for an approach of this kind, based mainly on *Scrip. Inc.*

²⁵ Theoph. 501, trans. Mango and Scott (1997) 684.

²⁶ Nikephoros, *Apologeticus* in *PG* 100, col. 556 mentions the *demoi* of the hippodrome, a faction of the church, the people of the theatre (mimes), street merchants (for whom he uses very harsh words) and soldiers as followers of the iconoclasts. For an interpretation of the passage see Alexander (1958) 116. See also Whitton (1996) 145–6 and 151 for the support of iconoclasm among the population of Constantinople.

²⁷ Pratsch (1998) 208–14.

²⁸ *Scrip. Inc.* 343.21: καὶ ἀνέκραξεν ὁ λαὸς ἀπὸ τῶν τευχῶν 'ὁ σταυρὸς ἐνίκησεν'.

²⁹ Kresten (1981) 80–81 and 94–95. See also Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 382–4.

towards re-establishing iconoclasm, as it was understood by the *Scriptor incertus*.³⁰ It was just a symbolic measure conceived to encourage resistance in hard times.

Nevertheless, these iconoclastic sectors in the capital could have pushed the emperor to take the first moves against icon worship, although the sources naturally make Leo wholly responsible for the process and the senators only play the role of accomplices. If the emperor wanted to tackle the danger and a possible defection of a sector of the Constantinopolitan population, it was necessary to approach these active iconoclasts and win them to his cause. A compromise with them was necessary.

When the danger of the Bulgarians disappeared after the death of Krum on 14 April 814 and the ensuing victory of Leo over the Bulgarians near Mesembria,³¹ Leo sought to establish an agreement in the Church between icon worshippers and iconoclasts. That he actually changed sides is claimed by the Continuator and Genesios, who explain the process of conversion of Leo to iconoclasm through the intrigues of Theodotos Melissenos, nicknamed Kassiteras, who was soon to replace Nikephoros as patriarch.³² It is significant that Theodotos was the offspring of an influential family of Armenian descent, the Melissenoi.³³ His father was Michael Melissenos, who was appointed by Constantine V in 766 to rule as strategos of the theme of the Anatolikoi. The Isaurian emperor was in fact Theodotos's uncle, for Michael Melissenos had married the sister of his wife Eudokia.³⁴ Theodotos acted at the time as a mere representative of the senatorial circles, for he was *protasekretis* and *spatharokandidatos*,³⁵ his ensuing nomination as patriarch in 815 being probably the political consequence of his services to the emperor.³⁶ In any event, Leo's iconoclasm could well have been a tactical move prompted by political considerations and does not necessarily represent a personal religious belief deliberately concealed from his former protectors and church authorities and only revealed after his seizure of power.

The hagiographical sources depict Leo discussing icon worship with the champions of icons and trying to find a common basis for an agreement. Understandably the sources stress the coercion used by the emperor in order to force the agreement and also denounce his false arguments. But even behind the propaganda we can sometimes discern the emperor trying to promote a compromise.³⁷

³⁰ *Scrip. Inc.* 346.2–12.

³¹ Th. Cont. I.13 (24.9–25.19) and Gen. I.12 (10.4–19).

³² Th. Cont. I.11 (22.10–23.18), 15–16 (27.3–28.15) and Gen. I.9 (8.64–9.83), 13 (11.32–59).

³³ Settapani (2006) 77 and 492–505.

³⁴ Pratsch (1999b) 148–50.

³⁵ Pratsch (1999b) 150–51.

³⁶ As the cases of Tarasios, Nikephoros and later Photios show, it was customary in the ninth century to appoint as patriarchs civil servants in the imperial administration.

³⁷ Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 368–72 underline that Leo proposed to introduce a relatively mild form of iconoclasm and that he did so presenting himself as arbitrator of an ongoing debate.

Interesting, for example, is a well-known passage of the *Scriptor Incertus*, where Leo discusses the issue with the patriarch:

Around the month of December [814] Leo reveals to the patriarch that “the people take offence at the images for they say that we are wrong in worshipping them and because of this the barbarians rule over us. “Acquiesce”, he says, “a little, exercise dispensation (οικονομίαν) for the people and let us take away these images that are (hanging) low”.³⁸

It is clear that the emperor was trying to convince the prelates of the Church that a certain degree of appeasement of the most radical iconoclasts was convenient in order to avoid further troubles. As a first step, he suggested the removal of icons hanging low on church walls in order to avoid *proskynesis*. The use of the word *οικονομία* in this context is very revealing of the emperor’s intentions. His policies, however, failed, for patriarch Nikephoros refused any compromise and even challenged the authority of the emperor.³⁹ Thus the conflict evolved and escalated, ending finally with the deposition and banishment of the patriarch.

Who were the persons urging Leo to re-establish an iconoclast policy in the Empire? The *Life of Nikephoros* mentions six members of Leo’s committee charged with the drawing up of the iconoclastic *florilegium*: two senators (John Spektas and Eutychanos), the bishop Antonios of Sylaiou, the monks Leontios and Zosimas and, last but not least, the lector John the Grammarian, who was an Armenian like Leo himself and is generally considered the éminence grise behind the emperor’s plans.⁴⁰ Some other names can be added, including Theodotos Kassiteras, who was appointed patriarch after Nikephoros.

These names, however, tell us little about the social forces behind the iconoclasts or the actual reasons that moved Leo and his entourage to again put in force a ban on icons. It must be presumed that the crisis provoked by the successive defeats of Nikephoros I in 811 and Michael I in 813, both at the hands of the Bulgarian khan Krum, re-opened regional tensions as many sectors of the army all over the empire probably made icon worship responsible for the last military fiascos. We must take into account the traditional connection between iconoclasm and the armies at the time or, to put it differently, between victory in the battlefield and orthodoxy in the faith, as is rightly described in the *Scriptor Incertus* when explaining the circumstances that pushed Leo V to embrace iconoclasm. The question now is whether, when Leo decided to revert to iconoclasm after Krum’s death, he was

³⁸ *Scrip. Inc.* 352.11–16: Καὶ περὶ τὸν Δεκέμβριον μῆνα δηλοῖ τὸν πατριάρχην ὁ Λέων ὅτι ὁ λαὸς σκανδαλίζεται διὰ τὰς εἰκόνας, λέγοντες ὅτι κακῶς αὐτὰς προσκυνοῦμεν καὶ ὅτι διὰ τοῦτο καὶ τὰ ἔθνη κυριεύουσιν ἡμῶν· καὶ συγκατάβα, φησί, τὶ μικρόν, καὶ ποίησον οἰκονομίαν διὰ τὸν λαόν, καὶ τὰ χαμηλὰ περιέλωμεν. See note 50 below for icons hanging high on the walls.

³⁹ See Pratsch (1999a) 138–42.

⁴⁰ Alexander (1958) 127.

urged by the unrest among the supporters of iconoclasm at Constantinople, as we suggested above, or considered as well the influence of the iconoclasts in other regions of the Empire. Particularly, and considering the military career of Leo in eastern Anatolia, it must be considered whether iconoclast sympathies of the army at the Arab frontier carried some weight in determining his religious policy.

1.2 Iconoclasm in Anatolia

This leads us to the thorny question of the “geography of iconoclasm”. The old assumption that iconoclasm had supporters mainly in the eastern regions of Anatolia, from whence came Leo III and Leo V, whereas the population of the western part of the empire, mainly the Balkans and Italy, followed a more conciliatory stance towards icons, has long been abandoned as over-simplified.⁴¹ It is now accepted that although Islamic and Judaic “iconophobia” might have influenced the attitude towards images of every nature among eastern Christians in the Middle East,⁴² the appearance of iconoclasm in the empire is an unrelated or independent phenomenon.⁴³ Accordingly, the ultimate reason for the crisis lay in the internal contradictions of the Christian tradition regarding images of Divinity. Brubaker and Haldon have recently made an extensive and detailed review of the old and new, general and concrete circumstances that led to the outbreak of the crisis, so that it does not appear necessary to review this evidence here.⁴⁴

In any case, it must be emphasized that the regional distribution of supporters and enemies of icon worship had therefore nothing to do with the proximity to Islamic territory. If we follow the text of the *Life of Stephen the Younger*, the iconophiles found refuge from the iconoclast policy of Constantinople in peripheral regions not only of the west, like southern Italy and Dalmatia, but also of the east, in territories bordering the Arabic lands like eastern Pontos, Cyprus or the southern Anatolian coast.⁴⁵ Certainly, these were not necessarily areas where an iconophile tradition was especially strong, but simply areas where imperial

⁴¹ See specially Ahrweiler (1977), Thierry (1998b) and Auzépy (2004) 135–43.

⁴² In Signes Codoñer (2013c) I try to prove that the situation of icon worship among the Melkites appears more complex than is generally assumed, so we must admit the presence of icon worshippers along with partisans, if not of iconoclasm proper, at least of aniconic views.

⁴³ See however Crone (1980) for a balanced assessment of this influence considered from an historical perspective. It is upon this eastern influence that the iconophile propaganda based its accusations of philo-islamism and philo-judaism of the iconoclasts. Most of them took the form of legends and stories without much reliability. For a general overview of some of these texts see for example Speck (1990). Highly recommended is a reading of the contributions collected in Auzépy (2007).

⁴⁴ See especially Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 50–66, 89–143.

⁴⁵ *Life of Stephen the Younger* §28, trans. Auzépy (1997) 218–21 (with detailed notes on the places named).

iconoclastic authority could not be implemented and which perhaps provided asylum for iconophile monks. Only in the case of Cyprus, which at the time formed a sort of condominium between Byzantium and the caliphate, do we find evidence for the existence of a continuous local tradition favouring icon worship.⁴⁶ In other regions the question is more debatable. For example, in the Aegean, many churches with iconoclastic decoration have been preserved, as the special case of Naxos makes evident.⁴⁷ This discredits the old theory that the rebellion of the Hellas and the Cyclades fleet against Leo III in 727 had something to do with the defence of the icons.⁴⁸

It is with all these arguments in mind that we must approach the possibility that the iconoclast presence in the armies of Anatolia grew as a result of the continuous warfare against the Arabs during the victorious reigns of the Isaurian emperors in the eighth century. In fact, if the iconophiles fled to peripheral regions where the authority of the Empire was less evident, this was certainly not the case for regions like Chaldia, Cappadocia or Isauria, where the authority of the central government and the armies was continuously present, for they were border areas crucial for the defence of Anatolia.

However, it is difficult to find evidence of the iconoclast sympathies of the soldiers of these areas. Cappadocia is not an exception,⁴⁹ for the aniconic churches preserved in its territory are difficult to date because of the schematic character of the motifs used. Moreover, the general absence of icons and the multiplication of crosses in all these Cappadocian churches (as well as the lack of any decoration at all) does not suffice to characterize them as iconoclastic in the proper sense of the term (referring to the iconoclastic period), and it simply confirms that a cult of the cross (stavrophilia) was well established in the region long before the arrival of iconoclasm. This only confirms that iconoclasts did not need to exert much pressure against local traditions when trying to implement their doctrines.

On the other hand, decorative images can coexist with geometric figures without this denying the basic iconoclast character of some buildings. In fact, most of the literary sources, mainly based on iconophile propaganda, depict a distorted and rigid image of iconoclasm that does not match well with the archaeological findings and can only be corrected through the minute analysis of a handful of texts

⁴⁶ Cameron (1992).

⁴⁷ See Vasilaki (1962–1963), Christides (1984) 128–33, Malamut (1988) 216–18, 568, Chatzidakis, Drandakis, Zias, Acheimastou-Potamianou and Vasilaki-Karakatsani (1989), especially the contributions of Zias (1989) and Acheimastou-Potamianou (1989), Brubaker and Haldon (2001) 25–8 and Mitsani (2004–2006) 395–6 (with further bibliography in Greek).

⁴⁸ Nikephoros, *Short Hist.* §60 says that the inhabitants of the region rebelled, “disapproving as they did of this impiety” (οὐ προσέμενοι τὸ δυσσέβημα), but Theoph. 405, trans. Mango and Scott (1997) 560 only says that they revolted against Leo “moved by divine zeal”. See Ahrweiler (1977) 23, Auzépy (2004) 136 and Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 80–81.

⁴⁹ For Isauria see Thierry (1998b) 664–6.

preserving iconoclastic credo or practice.⁵⁰ Finally, the existence of images in some Cappadocian churches of the iconoclast period does not question the adherence to iconoclasm of the armies settled in the region, but, at most, just proves the existence of a monastic community in the area which was somehow resistant to official iconoclasm. The purpose and uses of the individual churches must be taken into consideration in order to come to a conclusion. Under these circumstances it comes as no surprise that no consensus has been reached about the impact and extent of iconoclasm in Cappadocia during the eighth and ninth centuries.⁵¹

However it may seem, the fact remains that Cappadocia has preserved approximately half of the 50 buildings attributed to the iconoclast period on the basis of their decoration.⁵² This high number may certainly have to do with the particular favourable conditions for the preservation of churches and buildings in Cappadocia, for most of them were built into the rocks. However, there are many churches where crosses have been replaced by images, marking an abandonment of aniconic representation that may indicate a transition to icon worship. This is the case with a spectacular recent finding in a little chapel near Koron, the ancient capital of theme and see of the military headquarters.⁵³ There, two mounted soldiers (identified by inscriptions as the scribon Leo and the tourmarches Michael) are depicted piercing with their lances a figure of a devil with a lion head. This image, dating perhaps to the end of the ninth century (if not later) and reflecting a local cult of fallen soldiers (although the figures are not provided with a nimbus), has been painted over a geometric cross under an arcade. Beyond this particular case the relegation of the omnipresent cross from Cappadocian churches is already an accomplished fact in the tenth century, with the exception of the victory cross, which continued to be very popular among the soldiers at the time of the Byzantine re-conquest, in a period of open worship of icons.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ See again Haldon and Brubaker (2011) 144–51, 212–34, 294–356, 411–47 for a review of the artisanal production of the period of iconoclasm and the problems related to its dating. The authors emphasize throughout the book that only the *worship of holy icons* was condemned by the iconoclasts, but this does not mean that images were not accepted or even promoted by them under different circumstances. Accordingly, we know that Leo III did not fail to erect an image of the apostles, the prophets and the cross (ibid. 102–3, 128–35) or that during the second iconoclasm images were accepted that were put high on the walls of the churches (ibid. 380–82, 412–13).

⁵¹ See Epstein (1977), Thierry (1980), (1982), (1998a) 892–7, (2002) 135–42 and Jolivet-Lévy (1991) 335–7, (1997) 37–41.

⁵² Brubaker and Haldon (2001) 25. The authors consider (ibid. 4–5) that historical circumstances make it particularly unlikely that Cappadocia was the centre of an extensive artisanal activity during the iconoclast period. This makes identification of artistic trends in comparison with other areas even more difficult.

⁵³ Thierry (2009). I will deal again with this image in Chapter 5.4 in relation to the akrites soldiers.

⁵⁴ This type of “nicephoric” cross, introduced first by Leo III, was usually inscribed either with Ἡσοῦς Χριστός νικᾷ or ἐν τούτῳ νικά. It continued to be used after 843 but

Moreover, we do not have many literary sources that could confirm a special adherence of Cappadocia to iconoclasm. The most important testimony is provided by Arethas of Patras, bishop of Kaisareia, who laments at the beginning of the tenth century the persistence of iconoclasm among the inhabitants of the region.⁵⁵ Also interesting is the case of the *Life of Eudokimos*, born in Cappadocia and raised in Constantinople, who died at Charsianon while holding a military command during the reign of Theophilos.⁵⁶ Apparently Eudokimos did not accomplish any miracle before his death and represents, as Marie-France Auzépy proved, the model of an iconoclast saint, a man living in the world but concerned about his neighbours' spiritual and material welfare, the reversal of monkish withdrawal.⁵⁷ It is significant that the body of Eudokimos was transferred to the capital after his death, where he was object of cult until the thirteenth century. Does this prove the popularity of the local saint among his fellow soldiers at the capital?

Be this as it may, although iconoclasts may well have had an important presence in the eastern border of the empire, as is perhaps proved by the case of Cappadocia, they do not appear to have risen in arms against any iconophile emperor between 787 and 813. Moreover, when Bardanes the Turk, Leo's first sponsor and relative, rebelled in 803 against Nikephoros I, he acted for reasons other than the issue of icons, for he was a pious icon worshipper.⁵⁸ Again, when the chronicler Theophanes criticized Nikephoros and recorded his "ten vexations" of 809–810,⁵⁹ he did it again as a partisan of images. It appears then that there were other factors and reasons more important than images that orientated the "political" parties in the Empire. Regional tensions between the provinces appear as a likely reason for conflict. In fact Nikephoros, in his first vexation recorded by Theophanes, "removed Christians from all the themata and ordered them to proceed to the Sklaviniias after selling their states", thus causing no minor source of discontent among the population. Leo, who seized power barely three years after this measure, was probably expected by the provincials to somehow change things.

However, Leo, as an inexperienced politician, probably became involved in the politics of the imperial capital, where he remained for many months after his seizure of power. Forced by circumstances and the pressure of the army and the population, he re-introduced iconoclasm as the official doctrine. He surely miscalculated this move, considering that he could implement some form of iconoclasm after appealing to the iconophiles for a compromise. But he met with stubborn opposition from some sectors of the Church, led by the patriarch Nikephoros, who did not comply with his wishes. The council of Nikaia II had

devoid of its iconoclast connotations. For details see Cheynet (1992).

⁵⁵ Arethas, *Scripta Minora*, nr. 7, 75–81.

⁵⁶ *PmbZ*#1640 with further bibliography. The metraphrastic *Life* was edited by Loparev (1893). Loparev (1908) contains a later reworking made by Constantine Akropolites.

⁵⁷ See Ševčenko (1977) 127 and Auzépy (1992).

⁵⁸ Theoph. 479–80 and Th. Cont. I.1–3 (6.13–10.19).

⁵⁹ Theoph. 486–8, trans. Mango and Scott (1997) 667–9.

given official status to the “iconophile party” and it could not be dismantled as easily as before 787. Consequently a new crisis broke out without the previous regional tensions being resolved. Thus Leo felt obliged to resort increasingly to violence and repression of the dissident icon worshippers as he realized that he could not oblige them to accept his compromise policy concerning the icons.⁶⁰

However, Leo’s cruelty and harshness were not necessarily just a result of his persecution of dissident iconophiles. In the histories and chronicles these qualities appear in fact connected with his duties as ruler. The Continuator characterizes thus Leo’s government:

This success [the victory against the Bulgarians] rendered him yet bolder and more audacious and brought out his innate cruelty. For he made no distinction between great and minor offences but passed one and the same sentence against all who were apprehended on whatever charge: the cutting off of a vital limb and its exhibition, suspended in the sight of all. These deeds instilled pity in all men for those who carried them out but hatred and abject loathing for Leo. For by exercising his inborn ferocity in unbridled and in no wise restrained fashion, indisposed toward any mildness, mercilessly abusing the nature of his fellow men, he reaped the reward of enmity, not friendship.⁶¹

This portrait of Leo’s government may reflect the severity of a provincial soldier ruling in the capital and trying to assert himself against potential enemies. Either a rude character or an increasing sense of isolation may suffice to explain the harshness of the measures taken by Leo against offenders. Icon worship does not seem to play any role in that. Moreover, it is significant that Leo’s sense of justice was mentioned and his political competence acknowledged, even by such a foe as the patriarch Nikephoros.⁶²

These same sources mention how Leo “through his own efforts raised up cities everywhere in Thrace and Macedonia from the foundations” and record his campaigns in Thrace. Certainly, no word is said about the emperor’s interest in eastern affairs. It is, however, hazardous to connect this lack of evidence with the support the Anatolian provinces gave to the rebellion of Thomas the Slav, since it was only under Michael of Amorion that Thomas’s usurpation extended all over Anatolia, as we shall see in Chapter 2.2. In any case, the Continuator and Genesios record that Thomas the Slav, after invading Anatolia, gained the support of the population by distributing among the common people the revenues of the taxes.⁶³

⁶⁰ For a detailed list of the hagiographic sources with the data they provide about Leo see *PmbZ* #4244 esp. 676–8. See also *PBE* s.v. ‘Leo 15’.

⁶¹ *Th. Cont.* I.14 (25.20–26.8). The same accusations appear in *Gen.* I.15 (13.83–91), who clearly dissociates Leo’s harshness from the persecution of the iconophiles.

⁶² *Th. Cont.* I.19 (30.6–31.6) and *Gen.* I.16 (14.11–15.43) and I.23 (21.34–38). See Signes Codoñer (1995) 137–40 and Chapter 24.

⁶³ *Th. Cont.* II.11 (53.6–9) and *Gen.* I.2 (23.90–93).

Nevertheless, the fact that some sources present Thomas the Slav as a defender of icon worship merits discussion in full before we come to a final conclusion as to the actual significance of the conflict about icons at the time.

1.3 Thomas' Icon Worship, and the Melkite Patriarch of Antioch

Only two sources connect Thomas the Slav with icon worship: the anonymous *Acta of David, Symeon and George* and the *Life of St. Theodore Stoudites* by Michael Stoudites. In both of them Thomas “pretended to be” or “was said to be” a supporter of icons.⁶⁴ That Thomas actually defended icons is also consistent with his assumption of the personality of Constantine VI mentioned in Michael’s letter to Louis the Pious and the histories of the Continuator and Genesios.⁶⁵ Even more important is the fact, also reported by the Continuator and Genesios, that the Melkite patriarch of Antioch, Job, crowned Thomas emperor. This episode deserves perhaps closer attention, as Antioch lay in the caliphate and his patriarch was outside the emperor’s authority.

According to the Continuator and Genesios, when Thomas had already begun his uprising against Michael, the Arabs took the opportunity to make some inroads into the eastern part of the empire. Thomas then invaded the Saracens’ country in order to confront these attacks. He forced the invaders to conclude a peace treaty and make an alliance with him, promising them that he would abandon the Roman borders and put control of the borders in their hands.⁶⁶ Here the Continuator adds: “Whereupon he was not unsuccessful in his purpose, but received the crown and was proclaimed emperor by Job⁶⁷ who then held the see of Antioch.” Genesios is a bit more precise: “Having thus made a treaty with the Agarenoi, with the knowledge of their leader (εἰδήσει τοῦ αὐτῶν ἀρχηγοῦ)⁶⁸ he was crowned emperor by the Patriarch Job of Antioch.”

Obviously the crowning of Thomas in Antioch was not possible without the caliph’s knowledge and consent, but it is difficult to ascertain whether the move was planned by Thomas or by the caliph himself, who, after this arrangement took place, should have provided the Byzantine rebel, according to both historians,

⁶⁴ *Acta Davidis*, 232.12–13: προσποιοῦμενος καὶ τῶν ὀρθῶν εἶναι δογμάτων φύλαξ καὶ τῶν ἁγίων εἰκόνων προσκυνητής. *Life of St. Theodore* in PG 99, col. 320A: The emperor Michael summoned the iconophile leaders to Constantinople φόβῳ τοῦ μὴ προσρῆναί τινας αὐτῶν τῇ τοῦ Θωμᾶ συμφρατρία καθότι ἐλέγετο τὰς ἱεράς εἰκόνας ἀποδέχσθαι τε καὶ προσκυνεῖν.

⁶⁵ *Letter to Louis* 476.15–17, Th. Cont. II.10 (51.14–17) and Gen. II.4 (25.60–26.69). See Chapter 2 for the alternative versions provided by these texts about the outbreak of the civil war.

⁶⁶ Th. Cont. I.12 (54.8–23) and Gen. II.2 (24.7–15).

⁶⁷ The text of the manuscript reads Ἰάκωβ, but it must be corrected to Ἰώβ, the reading found in Gen. and Scyl.

⁶⁸ Kaldellis (1998) 29 translates “with the concurrence of their leader”.

with many troops. In other words, was Thomas' rebellion the result of a Byzantine internal strife later supported by the Arabs, as both Byzantine historians sustain, or was Thomas used by the caliph as a puppet emperor in order to take hold of the eastern part of the empire?

This last possibility is suggested by Michael the Syrian. In his report about Thomas' rebellion Michael initially says nothing about a crowning of Thomas by any patriarch when Ma'mūn supported the rebel in 819 after his arrival at Baghdad.⁶⁹ But many pages later, when the author speaks about the invasion of Cilicia by Ma'mūn at the beginning of Theophilos' reign, we read a curious account:

Al-Ma'mūn went to Cilicia. A Roman, who pretended to be of imperial stock, went to his encounter and demanded the caliph to appoint him emperor. Al-Ma'mūn gave welcome to the words of this forger. He ordered Job, patriarch of the Chalcedonians of Antioch, to consecrate him as emperor, for he had been told that no emperor was elected without the patriarch. Having recited the prayers upon him, he put on him a crown whose gold and precious stones were worth three thousand dinars. When the people of Constantinople heard about that, the bishops assembled and excommunicated the poor Job his co-religionist.⁷⁰

This piece of information is evidently misplaced in the narrative of Michael, for there was no rebel supported by Ma'mūn against Theophilos. It must be Thomas again, but apparently Michael's source did not mention his name or the year of his uprising during Ma'mūn's reign, so that the chronicler put the information in the wrong place without identifying the man as Thomas. According to this version, it was Ma'mūn who devised all the strategy about the crowning of Thomas using his ascendancy over the patriarch as a way of creating a rival emperor to the one sitting at Constantinople.

This compliance of an eastern patriarch with the caliph's will is corroborated by the Arab *Annals* of Eutychios, Melkite patriarch of Alexandria (c. 933/935–940). He tells us how this same patriarch Job accompanied Ma'mūn's successor Mu'tašim in his campaign against Asia Minor in 838:

Afterwards Mu'tašim entered the territory of the Romans with the purpose of invading it and taking with him Job, the patriarch of Antioch. He besieged the city of Ankyra. The patriarch Job spoke in Greek to the Rum and said to them: "Submit yourselves to the caliph and pay him the head tax. This is preferable than to be murdered and taken as prisoners." The Romans insulted him and hurled stones at him. Then Mu'tašim took Ankyra and set it on fire. From there he proceeded to Amorion and besieged it for a month. Each day Job, the patriarch of Antioch, approached alone the citadel and talked to the Romans in Greek trying to frighten them and persuade them to pay the head tax, so that Mu'tašim could

⁶⁹ Mich. Syr. 501, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 37.

⁷⁰ Mich. Syr. 524, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 75.

leave them in peace. But the Rum heaped insults on him and hurled stones at him. But the Romans continued in this way until Mu‘taşım took Amorion.⁷¹

Curiously enough, no mention of the crowning of Thomas by this same Job is made in the *Annals* of Eutychios, perhaps because they were corrected and interpolated in Antioch by the Melkite community.⁷² In fact, the information about the appointment of Job as patriarch in Antioch during the reign of Ma’mūn contained in the most diffused version of the *Annals* is lacking in a shorter version that seems to be closer to the original and that ends unfortunately with the reign of Ma’mūn without mentioning Mu‘taşım’s campaign in 838.⁷³ However, the *Annals* do mention a Byzantine emperor named Constantine who apparently reigned between Nikephoros and Theophilos.⁷⁴ It could be that this Constantine is actually our Thomas, who took this name and aimed at the imperial crown, for there is no mention of Leo V or Michael II as emperors in the *Annals*. Another possibility is that some confusion with Theophilos’s son and co-emperor Constantine took place here.

Be that as it may, the patriarch Job is depicted in the *Annals*, the chronicle of Michael the Syrian and our two Byzantine historians as a true servant of the caliph, be this Ma’mūn or Mu‘taşım. This must be true, for all these sources are independent of each other. Nevertheless, we can perhaps suspect that his subordinate role, especially his pathetic appeal to surrender before the besieged cities of Anatolia, was not especially pleasant for him, particularly if we consider that the *Letter to Theophilos* supposedly written by the three Melkite patriarchs had him as one of the signatories, if not as an author, as we will consider in Chapter 21. For this letter urged Theophilos to invade the caliphate and “expressed the desire and hope of the Patriarchs to secede from the caliphate”.⁷⁵ Contrary to Vasiliev, we do not think that the official support patriarch Job gave to the caliph “would make it impossible for him to sign” this letter. If the quoted passage pertains to the original core of the letter supposedly addressed to the emperor, it would imply that there was a growing dissatisfaction among eastern Christians with their servant role as pawns in the chess game of the Middle East. Perhaps the conflict had already begun in Ma’mūn’s time when the caliph forced the unwilling patriarch to lend support to the cause of Thomas. This explains why Thomas could have been seen as a renegade by most Byzantines despite being crowned by the Melkite patriarch of Antioch. In fact, this crowning did not mean any real support of eastern Christians for Thomas, but only the backing of the caliphate of his rebellion.

⁷¹ Eutychios, *Annals*, 406 (I use the Italian translation). See also *PG* 111, col. 1134.

⁷² This is the opinion of Breydy (1983) 87.

⁷³ Breydy (1985) 128.

⁷⁴ Eutychios, *Annals*, 404 and 407.

⁷⁵ Vasiliev (1942–1944) 224.

This misuse of the Church in the rebellion excludes Thomas' uprising from having anything to do with a sincere defence of icon worship⁷⁶ and explains perfectly why the *Acta of David, Symeon and George* and the *Life of St. Theodore Stoudites* considered his role as defender of the images as a smokescreen. It also explains why most of the icon worshippers in the empire were, to say the least, diffident with Thomas and ignored almost entirely his iconophile stance. As we shall see, most of them were frightened by the ravaging army of rebels and disregarded Thomas' supposed iconophilia. For them it was the presence of barbarians (see Chapter 2.3) and Arabs (see Chapter 13.2) among Thomas's soldiers that really mattered. The harsh words of Michael the Syrian (and Bar Hebraeus) against Thomas, accusing him of converting to Islam under the influence of Ma'mūn's brother, Abū Ishāq, of blaspheming Christ and desecrating the mysteries,⁷⁷ are perhaps understandable from this perspective, although written by a Jacobite.

Thomas could thus have followed an iconophile policy simply to garner support for his cause, rather than from personal conviction. This makes more sense if he actually rebelled against Leo, and not against Michael the Amorion, as we will demonstrate in Chapter 2.

1.4 The Iconoclasm of the Amorians

It may appear strange at first sight that Michael, after coming to power through the murder of Leo, continued to adhere to iconoclasm. Moreover, as we have already seen, Thomas' adherence to icon worship was not taken seriously by iconophiles, who instead even rallied around Michael when they felt threatened by Thomas' troops. Why then should Michael have further supported iconoclasm?⁷⁸

We do not know what were the particular religious traditions of his family concerning icons. The sources connect him only with the heresy of the Athinganoi, which was rooted in Phrygia and Amorion.⁷⁹ The supposed Judaic tendencies of the Athinganoi, represented by the Byzantine sources as strict followers of Mosaic law, may ultimately connect them with the aniconism of the iconoclasts. However, the exact nature of the Athinganoi sect is highly controversial and it cannot be excluded that some of its features pertain to the realm of the heresiological literature and do not find correspondence with actual practices. As

⁷⁶ Köpstein (1983) 76–80 and 84–5 has already discarded as a cause for the war both the icon issue and the ethnic element. I agree only with the first conclusion and will therefore argue for the existence of regional tensions in Chapter 2.

⁷⁷ Mich. Syr. 524, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 75.

⁷⁸ For Michael's iconoclasm see the overview by Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 386–92.

⁷⁹ The main source for the Athinganoi beliefs of Michael is Th. Cont. II.3 (42.7–44.11). There is a comment on the passage in Signes Codoñer (1995) 183–8.

a matter of fact, aniconism does not appear as a feature of the Athinganoi in the preserved descriptions of their dogma.⁸⁰

In any case, Michael of Amorion seems to have been obliged to continue the iconoclastic policy of Leo the Armenian, for it would have caused him even greater problems to revert to icon worship, especially as he was dependent anew on the capital for his own survival as ruler. Exactly as during the Bulgarians' siege of Constantinople, the attack of Thomas against the capital would have forced Michael to commit to iconoclasm, favoured by the people and the army of the besieged city. To reopen a debate about icons could have signified for Michael political suicide at a moment when Thomas seemed to control both Asia and Europe and the emperor relied only upon the forces of the capital.

Again, as in Leo's case, it appears that Michael did not have personal reasons for adopting iconoclasm. In fact, he forbade any further discussion on that matter and allowed believers to act as they wanted concerning icon worship. Significantly, the Continuator describes Michael's policy toward icons in a different chapter from the one devoted to representing his Athinganoi beliefs.⁸¹ There, Michael orders his subjects "to do whatever each one desires and considers appropriate" (ἐκαστος οὖν τὸ δοκοῦν αὐτῷ ποιεῖτω καὶ ἐφετόν) as an answer to a personal entreaty of the deposed patriarch Nikephoros. This did not avoid the exile and persecution of reputed icon defenders such as Methodios and Euthymios, but in general the iconophiles experienced a period of appeasement, as the letters of Theodore Stoudites clearly show. It is revealing that Michael allowed the abbots to venerate images if they so wished as long as this happened outside of Constantinople. This confirms that the conflict about icons mattered only in the capital, whereas in the provinces different traditions coexisted most of the time.⁸²

This tolerant spirit of Michael was certainly partly a consequence of the civil war that rallied all Constantinopolitans around the emperor against the "barbarian" army of Thomas. But it continued after the civil war as well. The marriage of Michael c. 824–825 with iconophile Euphrosyne, Constantine VI's daughter and by then a nun, expresses the clear desire to connect the dynasty with the last Isaurian emperor, but also with his iconophile policy, exactly as Thomas the Slav had done during his revolt (Chapter 6). Moreover, in 821 Michael married Theophilos to an iconophile wife, Theodora, whose family also seem to have been mostly defenders of images (Chapter 4). This will ultimately explain how, after Theophilos' death, iconoclasm was finally condemned and icon worship re-established with the support and backing of the widow empress. It turns out that

⁸⁰ See Starr (1936), Rochow (1983) and Speck (1997).

⁸¹ Th. Cont. II.8 (47.16–49.19), corresponding to Gen. II.14 (35.68–77).

⁸² For a short characterization of Michael's iconoclasm, with references to the sources, see Bury (1912) 110–19, Martin (1930) 199–211, Treadgold (1988) 228–32, Pratsch (1998) 263–71, and Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 386–92.

at the time icon worship was for emperors more of a problem to be dealt with than a personal belief.⁸³

The natural consequence of this state of affairs would be that after Michael's death, his heir Theophilos would continue this policy of appeasement, especially as the civil war was over and the hard-liners of the iconophile party, such as Theodore Stoudites or the deposed patriarch Nikephoros, were already dead. However, the opposite turned out to be the case. Unlike Leo V or Michael II, Theophilos appears to have been a committed iconoclast.⁸⁴ The reason is perhaps related to the fact that Theophilos belonged to a different generation from Leo V or his father Michael. Although he was probably baptized by no less a person than Leo V as early as 803, and accordingly before the Armenian came to the throne (see Chapter 3.1), Theophilos was probably just 12 years old when his godfather Leo began to implement an iconoclast policy in 815. As his father also had a prominent position at court, the education of the child could not be left to chance and it is to be supposed that already during Leo's reign the iconoclastic indoctrination of the child Theophilos began. The figure of John the Grammarian appears as the main person responsible for the education of the young Theophilos. According to the Continuator,

He [John the Grammarian] was particularly beloved of Michael the stammerer, either simply because he shared in his heresy, or also because he had somehow distinguished himself for his eloquence. In any case he was beloved and was appointed as teacher of Theophilos. And when this latter took up the reins of the empire, he first granted him the dignity of synkellos and then made him patriarch of Constantinople because he had explained to him certain signs of the future through divination with dishes and sorcery.⁸⁵

It is nowhere said in this passage that John was appointed teacher of Theophilos when Michael came to the throne in December 820. Ralph-Johannes Lilie rightly noted that Theophilos had married as early as 821 and appears to have been an adult from the very beginning of his father's reign. He thus considered it unlikely that John was appointed his teacher only with the rise of Michael II to power.⁸⁶ However, I do not agree with his conclusion that later sources made John the Grammarian the teacher of Theophilos because of the close relationship between the two men during Theophilos' reign. It seems to me possible that Theophilos was taught by John during the reign of Leo V. Michael did not need to be an emperor to take care of the education of his child. As the case of Justin I at the beginning of

⁸³ See also Chapter 8.1 for the opinion of Hans-Georg Thümmel on the real relevance of theological disputes about icon worship at the time of second iconoclasm.

⁸⁴ For an assessment of Theophilos' iconoclasm see Rosser (1972) 64–107 and Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 392–404.

⁸⁵ Th. Cont. IV.7 (154.21–155.5).

⁸⁶ Lilie (1999b) 172–5.

the sixth century shows, men of arms making a career in the capital cared for the education of their children, for this was the most useful investment in their future. Theophilus thus became a learned and cultivated emperor exactly as Justinian did and defended iconoclasm with more zeal and conviction than his two predecessors on the throne, in a certain sense with the same commitment that Justinian had to the Chalkedonian creed.

This did not mean that his duty as a ruler was devoted in great part to the cause of iconoclasm. Again, as we shall see in the next chapters, more urgent and important matters demanded his attention. It is only the hagiographic sources that depict him as a bigoted emperor and prosecutor of iconophiles.⁸⁷ A priori, the controversy about icons appears relevant only in his relation with the Melkites of the Middle East, who still played an important role in the Byzantine concept of imperial oikoumene. Nevertheless, as we shall see in Chapter 21, not even in this case did the emperor's iconoclasm represent any divide between the eastern Christians and his Byzantine subjects.

⁸⁷ See *PmbZ* #8167, esp. 631–2 for a list of the topics provided by hagiographic sources about the emperor. See also *PBE* s.v. “Theophilus 5”.

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Chapter 2

Unrest at the Eastern Border

2.1 The *Tourmarchai* of the *Phoideratoi*

Since his ascension Leo must have had serious concerns about the fidelity of the eastern regions of the empire, conscious as he was that the military threat posed by the caliphate could eventually turn out to be more dangerous than the Bulgarian khaganate. Nor could he afford to have a new front open in the east before putting an end to the Bulgarian invasion. As we know from his career, Leo was well acquainted with the situation on the frontier and probably knew the potential dangers. This explains why he wanted to prevent further troubles by sending his most intimate friends there. It is in this context that we must understand the appointment of Thomas as a *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* by Leo at the very beginning of his reign (see immediately below).

Leo probably held this post in high esteem because he had served as *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* in the army under Nikephoros I, who appointed Leo to this office when he and his comrade Michael joined him after the defeat of their commander Bardanes the Turk by the emperor. The information is provided by the Continuator:

For already Leo and Michael had both run off to the emperor – the former obtaining as reward the charge of the *phoideratoi* and the imperial house of Zeno and the *Dagistheus*, the latter the office of *Comes* [of the Court]¹ and the house of *Karianos* – and they persuaded *Bardanos* that he had been mistaken with regard to himself.²

The fact that Leo was awarded two houses in Constantinople made sense to John Haldon only if the unit of the *phoideratoi* was established by then in Constantinople.³ This would make of the *phoideratoi* a kind of *tagma* unit. However, I think that in this particular case Haldon pushes too far the opposition between Constantinopolitan *tagmata* and provincial *themata*, as we cannot completely rule

¹ This term is a silent addition of the editors, and does not appear in the only manuscript of the Continuator. See Signes Codoñer (1995) 19 and 31.

² Th. Cont. I.3 (9.9–12): ἄρτι μὲν γὰρ Λέων ἄρτι δὲ καὶ Μιχαὴλ ἀπορρυέντες πρὸς βασιλέα, ἄλλον ὁ μὲν τὴν φοιδεράτων καὶ βασιλικὸν οἶκον τοῦ Ζήνωνος καὶ τὸν Δαγισθέα, ὁ δὲ τὴν τῆς [κῶρτης] κόμητος ἀρχὴν καὶ τὸν τοῦ Καριανοῦ οἶκον ἀπενεγκάμενοι, οὐκ ἀγαθὰ φρονεῖν αὐτὸν περὶ ἑαυτοῦ πεποιήκασιν. The office of *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* is given to Leo also; *ibid.* 10.21. See also Gen. I.8.

³ Haldon (1984) 246–51.

out the existence of some elite troops with provincial headquarters in the period. I would argue that the houses given to the tourmarches of the phoideratoi are not to be understood as housing a small contingent of the tourmarches' forces in the capital, but only as a sort of representation of this unit in Constantinople, as we know was the case for many foreign rulers in the sphere of Byzantium.⁴ Indeed, the phoideratoi could have been settled in a province without his tourmarches necessarily being with them all year, especially in the winter season.⁵ When we find Leo campaigning in Anatolia in 811, he would not necessarily have changed Constantinople for a provincial scenario, as Haldon supposes to have been the case.⁶ The narrative of the Continuator, who depicts Leo campaigning constantly in east Anatolia with his troops after he was appointed tourmarches of the phoideratoi,⁷ makes more sense if we think that he fulfilled his duties regularly near the eastern borders of the empire. So the Continuator could not have known that Leo was by then promoted to the office of strategos of the Armeniakoi, as Haldon rightly argues following the contemporary account of Theophanes,⁸ because this promotion did not mean that Leo left the capital to take up residence in the east. This could be an argument, however weak, for the phoideratoi being active in the theme of the Armeniakoi, perhaps in the frontier zone.

The Continuator and Genesisios also make it clear that Leo appointed Thomas as tourmarches because he considered him his dearest friend since childhood.⁹ A crucial piece of information is added in another passage of the Continuator, where it is said that when Thomas heard of the assassination of Leo he was tourmarches of the phoideratoi and stayed in the theme of the Anatolikoi.¹⁰ This precision could be understood as confirmation that the commander of the phoideratoi had a seat in the theme of the Anatolikoi, but also, as I suspect, that this was not the only place where he could stay, for otherwise such precision would have been unnecessary.

Both the Continuator and Genesisios mention as well that Thomas was born on Lake Gazouros. This is probably to be identified with the modern Beysehir Gölü, the ancient Pousgouse limne (Πουσγούση λίμνη) in the theme of the Anatolikoi, to the west of Ikonion and the south of Amorion.¹¹ However, Genesisios adds a significant

⁴ For this argument, see Signes Codoñer (1995) 30–31.

⁵ In fact Haldon (1984) 249 seems to admit this possibility as he says (my italics), “It does not seem unreasonable that the phoideratoi should have been in Constantinople, *or that a part of the unit should have been there.*”

⁶ Haldon (1984) 249.

⁷ Th. Cont. I.4 (10.20–11.17). Gen. I.8 (8.55–57) only refers briefly to the activities of Leo in the east.

⁸ Theoph. 489, trans. Mango and Scott (1997) 672. See Haldon (1984) 517–18.

⁹ Th. Cont. I.12 (24.1–2): Θωμᾶν δὲ τὸν ἑαυτοῦ διαφερόντως ὀμήλικα καὶ συμπαίστορα τῶν φοιδεράτων τουρμάρχην ἐγκαθιστᾷ; Gen. I.11 (9.95–1): Λέων ὁ βασιλεὺς Θωμᾶν τὸν ἑαυτοῦ ἠλικιώτην τουρμάρχην εἰς φοιβεράτους ἐπέστησεν.

¹⁰ Th. Cont. II.11 (52.10–12): ὃς τὴν τῶν φοιδεράτων τηρικαῦτα διοικῶν ἀρχὴν, κατὰ τὸν Ἀνατολικὸν ἐνδιατρίβων, ἐπεὶ τὸν Μιχαὴλ ἄρτι διήκουεν ἀνηρηκότα τὸν Λέοντα...

¹¹ Belke (1984) 218.

detail, for he says that Thomas, like Leo, “was also an Armenian by descent” (καὶ αὐτὸν ἐξ Ἀρμενίων τὸ γένος κατάγοντα).¹² Lemerle and Köpstein contended that Genesis’ precision was based on the misunderstanding of a former gloss that originally intended only to locate Lake Gazouros in the theme of the Armeniakoi.¹³ However, since Lake Gazouros appears not to be in the Armeniakoi, I suggested some time ago that the reference to Armenian descent was originally intended for Leo in Genesis’ source.¹⁴ Obviously the Armenian origins of Thomas seemed to be incompatible with the Slavic descent clearly attributed to the rebel Thomas in the account of the outbreak of the civil war and were accordingly to be rejected.

But the statement of Genesis is clear and presents no textual problems. In fact, the actual problem lies somewhere else, in the identification of Thomas the Armenian, the tourmarches of the phoideratoi and Leo’s playmate, with Thomas the Slav. We will duly consider this point in Chapter 13.1, but for the moment it will suffice to say that there is no reason to question Genesis’ statement about the Armenian descent of Thomas. This is an important point, for it partly accounts for the reasons behind Leo’s choice of Thomas: since both were of Armenian origin, some kind of close relationship between them is to be presupposed. That Leo appointed his old friend Thomas tourmarches reveals the importance he gave to the post: Leo had scarcely been proclaimed emperor when he took the decision to appoint Thomas. Leo probably did not have many people he could trust.

The importance of the tourmarches of the phoideratoi is also enhanced by the third person mentioned by the sources as having assumed the post. It is again another comrade in arms of Leo, Michael, the future emperor Michael II (820–829), the father of Theophilos. Our source is once more the Continuator, who mentions Michael’s position because he was accused of conspiracy against Leo V: Μιχαὴλ τοῦτο ἦν, ὃς τὴν φοιδεράτων τότε ἐπειλημμένος ἀρχὴν, ἐγκλήματι καθοσιώσεως ἄλοῦς.¹⁵ The Continuator says that Michael was first acquitted on this charge of conspiracy and that his imprisonment by Leo took place some time later, when compromising comments on Michael’s part against Leo reached the emperor’s ears. This imprisonment is accordingly dated to the very end of Leo’s reign, for Michael was in prison waiting for his execution when the emperor was murdered. We do not know, however, when this first accusation of conspiracy took place and, accordingly, at what time Michael was appointed tourmarches of the phoideratoi.

Usually no credence is given to this information, considering that Genesis makes Michael domestic of the exkoubitores in a passage that drew from the same

¹² Th. Cont. I.1 (7.3–4) and Gen. I.6 (7.14.15).

¹³ Lemerle (1965) 284 note 112 and Köpstein (1983) 66. This hypothesis is difficult to admit for it presupposes too much: a confusion between a lake (Gazouros) and a person (Thomas) as well as between Armenia and the theme of the Armeniakoi. The wording of the passage is clearly unambiguous.

¹⁴ Signes Codoñer (1995) 21–2.

¹⁵ Th. Cont. I.21 (33.22).

source as the Continuator.¹⁶ Genesios also refers to the appointment of Michael as domestic of the exkoubitores at the very beginning of Leo's reign in another passage of his work.¹⁷ Finally, George the Monk gives Michael the command of the tagma of the exkoubitores when mentioning his imprisonment at the end of Leo's reign.¹⁸ If we take the information of Genesios and George the Monk together at their face value, it would seem that Michael remained in charge of the exkoubitores during the whole of Leo's reign. The mention of Michael as tourmarches of the phoideratoi would be a slip of the Continuator, who attributed to Michael the same position actually held by Thomas.

But it could also be that the Continuator's information was sound after all and that Michael, after being appointed domestic of the exkoubitores by Leo at the beginning of his reign (according to Genesios), was acquitted of the charge of conspiracy against the emperor and subsequently given the provincial post of tourmarches of the phoideratoi.¹⁹ He must have then taken the post from Thomas the Armenian, for Leo appointed Thomas tourmarches of the phoideratoi at the beginning of his reign, as we have seen. This does not necessarily mean that Michael got the post because Thomas had already rebelled against Leo (for the date of the beginning of the rebellion see section 2.2), for it seems that Thomas the Armenian was not the same person as Thomas the Slav, as we shall argue in Chapter 13.1, and may have not been involved in the rebellion. In fact, it is perfectly possible that Michael was appointed tourmarches of the phoideratoi because Thomas the Armenian was promoted at the same time to a higher post (strategos?). The rebellion of Thomas the Slav may have been the ultimate cause of these changes. In any case, if the post of tourmarches of the phoideratoi was of crucial importance for the control of the eastern border, as we will argue, it may perhaps seem strange that Michael was appointed tourmarches just after being acquitted of a conspiracy charge. We can but speculate about the reasons for this appointment, but it may well have been intended as a challenge for Michael, a new opportunity to show his fidelity to the emperor by re-establishing authority in the east, questioned by the rebellion of Thomas the Slav. As Michael apparently failed in his mission (and this explains his second arrest at the very end of Leo's reign), Genesios and George the Monk could easily have ignored this late appointment of Michael as tourmarches and mentioned only his first post of domestic of the exkoubitores. If, however, the Continuator and Genesios

¹⁶ Gen. I.17 (15.44–47): Μιχαὴλ ὁ ἐξ Ἄμορίου τοῖς κατ' ἀνδρείαν προκόπτων ἐν προτερήμασι, παρ' ὃ καὶ τὸ τῶν ἐξκουβίτων πεπίστευτο σύνταγμα, διαβολῇ καθοσιώσεως ἐπισκῆπτεται.

¹⁷ Gen. I.11. See Signes Codoñer (1995) 152 for a brief commentary on the passage.

¹⁸ Georg. Mon. 788.9–10: Ἐξ ὧν ὑπῆρχε Μιχαὴλ ὁ τὴν τοῦ ἐκκουβίτου τάγματος ἀρχὴν διέπων.

¹⁹ Afinogenov (2001) 330, considers that Michael was first appointed tourmarches of the phoideratoi and thereafter promoted to domestic of the exkoubitores, but I do not find support for this sequence of events in the sources.

combined two sources in their narrative of the conspiracy of Michael, as Afinogenov claims, the omission of some details is understandable and even usual for the methods of the two authors, who used freely a common source.

A clue is perhaps provided by an obscure sentence from Genesios, who writes that, after being first acquitted by Leo of his charge of conspiracy, “Michael is sent away by the emperor to conduct the levy for this same unit”.²⁰ This “sending away” of Michael (ἐκπέμπεται) suggests a provincial destination, far away from the capital. If our rendering of στρατολόγημα as “levy” is correct,²¹ then Michael could have been charged with the levy of soldiers for the tagma of the exkoubitores that was under his command before the conspiracy was detected. We cannot know if the post of tourmarches of the phoideratoi was somehow connected with the levy of soldiers for the tagmata in the capital, but this could explain the presence of the tourmarches in the capital (and an official residence).²² In any case, it seems to me that a provincial destination for Michael after his first conspiracy is likely and is in accordance with the policy of Leo.

But what really was the function and importance of the tourmarches of phoideratoi that appears so suddenly in the sources of the ninth century?

The ancient Roman *foederati* included troops of nations or tribes that were associated with the empire by means of a *foedus*. However, as a study by Jean Maspéro had already revealed a hundred years ago,²³ in the time of Justinian the usual term for the ancient *foederati* was *symmachoi* (σύμμαχοι). The old Latin name, under the Greek form φοιδεράτοι, referred since then to foreign recruits of diverse nationalities who served in the Byzantine army as elite troops in separate units under their own commanders. The use of the term φοιδεράτοι is no longer attested after the Arab invasions of the seventh century until it reappears in the sources of the ninth. The most important are the *Taktika* edited by Oikonomides, where the office appears twice. The first is in the *Taktikon Uspenskij* traditionally dated ca. 842–843, where we find in a list *ho tourmarchēs tōn phiberatōn* (ὁ τουρμάρχης τῶν φιβεράτων) preceding *ho tourmarchēs Lykaonias* (ὁ τουρμάρχης Λυκαονίας).²⁴ The second is the somewhat later *Kletoroligion of Philotheos*, where we find a more detailed rendering of these two offices:²⁵

²⁰ Gen. I.17 (15.47–48): ἐκπέμπεται παρὰ βασιλέως διακυβερνᾶν τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ στρατολόγημα. This sentence has been misunderstood in the translation of Kaldellis (1998) 18: “he was sent away by the emperor to command the aforementioned corps”. Kaldellis identified στρατολόγημα with τὸ τῶν ἐξκουβίτων σύνταγμα previously mentioned in the text.

²¹ The occurrence of this term again in Gen. II.13 (35.62–63) is not conclusive. This time the general Ooryphas “assembles (through a levy?) a very mighty naval force” (ἀθροίζεται ναυτικὸν στρατολόγημα γενναιότατον).

²² As a matter of fact the tagma of the exkoubitores created in the fifth century was initially recruited from among eastern Isaurians; see Frank (1969) 204–6.

²³ Maspéro (1912).

²⁴ Oikonomides (1972) 55, 7–8. For an earlier dating see Živković (2007).

²⁵ Oikonomides (1972) 149, 23–4.

ὁ σπαθαροκανδιᾶτος καὶ τουρμάρχης τῶν φιβεράτων

ὁ σπαθαροκανδιᾶτος καὶ τουρμάρχης Λυκαονίας καὶ Παμφυλίας

Scholars have tried to explain these references in different ways.²⁶ Stein for example emended both texts in order to establish in them a *tourmarchēs Lykaonias kai Pisidias* (τουρμάρχης Λυκαονίας καὶ Πισιδίας) where we have now either a *tourmarchēs Lykaonias* (τουρμάρχης Λυκαονίας) or a *tourmarchēs Lykaonias kai Pamphylias* (τουρμάρχης Λυκαονίας καὶ Παμφυλίας).²⁷ The basis of the emendation was mainly the eleventh-century evidence of a passage in Skylitzes' history, where this writer mentions an army of "Pisidians and Lycaonians, who make up the tagma of the phoideratoi".²⁸ Moreover, Stein supposed that the tourmarches of the phoideratoi and the tourmarches of Lycaonia and Pisidia were one and the same person and that the two entries in both *Kletorologia* should be understood as a doublet. Haldon accepted Stein's emendation, but thought that there was no doublet and that accordingly the tourmarches of the phoideratoi and the tourmarches of Lycaonia and Pisidia remained two different offices. He argued convincingly that "it seems unlikely that the list drawn up by Philotheos and his colleagues would repeat a mistake or an ambiguous entry of some fifty years previously, in a text which is remarkably clear and which rationalises or clarifies a great number of its entries".²⁹ However, Haldon considered that both tourmarchai were based in the provinces of Lycaonia and Pisidia of the theme of the Anatolikoi, since he connected the phoideratoi with the frequent mentions of Lycaonian soldiers during the reign of Nikephoros I and thought accordingly that Skylitzes' assertion equating the phoideratoi with the Lycaonians and Pisidians reflected also the situation in the ninth century.

Nevertheless, if the phoideratoi "were made up at least partially of Lycaonians and Pisidians", as Haldon argues, why should they have been named φοιδεράτοι at all? This name was linked in the military tradition with barbarian units serving in the imperial army and there appears no reason to name it after the troops of a single region to the south of the theme of the Anatolikoi. The linking of the tourmarches of the phoideratoi with the Lycaonians and Pisidians may possibly reflect an evolution of this post, after it accumulated so much power in the first half of the ninth century. After the usurpations of Leo and Michael, the turning point could have been the rebellion of the Persians serving under Theophilos, which, as we shall consider in Chapter 10.2, were commanded by a tourmarches of the phoideratoi of Persian origin. Their excessive power again threatened the imperial authority, so that Theophilos may have divided the phoideratoi, which perhaps controlled most of the eastern frontier, into two or more contingents under the command of their own

²⁶ The best *status quaestionis* in Haldon (1984) 246–52. See also Signes Codoñer (1995) 35–6.

²⁷ Stein (1919) 138–9.

²⁸ Skyl., *Konstantinos Monomachos* 3 (426.32–33): Πισιδίας καὶ Λυκαόνας, οἵπερ ἀναπληροῦσι τὸ τάγμα τῶν φοιδεράτων.

²⁹ Haldon (1984) 247.

tourmarchai, these being the tourmarches of the phoideratoi proper, who retained the ancient title, and perhaps the tourmarchai of Lycaonia and Pisidia listed next in the *Taktika* mentioned above. That Skylitzes identified the phoideratoi with troops of Lycaonians and Pisidians can be easily explained if we suppose that these districts supplied the main contingents of the phoideratoi before they were divided among several tourmarchai after the Persian uprising.

Nevertheless, the significant point lies in the fact that all attested tourmarchai of the phoideratoi at the beginning of the ninth century were outsiders, even foreigners, in the eyes of the Greek establishment which ruled the empire. Leo was in fact Armenian or of Armenian descent, and many sources play with the story that makes him of Assyrian or even Mesopotamian origin.³⁰ The case of Thomas is also clear: either we accept his Armenian descent (mentioned by Genesios),³¹ or identify him with the rebel Thomas the Slav.³² Michael appears in the sources as being of Jewish descent and was perhaps related to the mysterious sect of the Athinganoi.³³ And finally, we must not forget the Persian Khurramite leader Naşr, who commanded the Persians as tourmarches of the phoideratoi under Theophilos' reign, to which we will return in Chapter 10.2.

Although three of these four tourmarchai seem to have been born in the territory of the empire – Michael in Amorion, Leo in a village called Pidra³⁴ and Thomas near Lake Gazouros³⁵ – they continued to be foreigners in the eyes of the dominant Greek establishment. Moreover, their biography links them inextricably with Anatolia, so they could be easily labelled as “Easterners” in the eyes of the Constantinopolitans. The question here is whether their common condition of outsiders was a mere chance or is to be related to the office of the tourmarches of the phoideratoi, which all four held in succession. I think that this second option may be the right one. The fact that the phoideratoi until the sixth century were mainly barbarians serving in the imperial armies is unlikely to have completely changed by the ninth century and probably explains why the appointed tourmarchai of the phoideratoi were also of foreign origin.

This circumstance points to them as commanders of foreign and barbarian troops serving in the empire. However, we should think of these soldiers not as mercenaries coming from abroad to enlist themselves in the Byzantine army (as was later the case for example with the Varangians during the reigns of Michael III and Basil II),³⁶ but as immigrants settled in the territories deserted by the previous population due to the continuous Muslim raids.

³⁰ See Turner (1990) and Signes Codoñer (1991) and (1994).

³¹ Gen. I.6 (7.14–15).

³² Köpstein (1983) 65–7 and Signes Codoñer (1995) 21–2 and 223–4.

³³ Signes Codoñer (1995) 183–8.

³⁴ Th. Cont. I.1 (6.9).

³⁵ Th. Cont. I.1 (7.3–4) and Gen. I.6 (7.14–15).

³⁶ See Blöndal and Benedikz (1978) 20–21, 32–3 and 41–53. For the embassy of the Rus to Theophilos see Chapter 20.1.

But what was the function of these barbarian phoideratoi in the ninth century, as the tagmata were developing along with the thematic armies? I think that the only reason for this unit of phoideratoi was the defence of the eastern frontier, where the defining lines of Byzantine culture got confused and a mixture of peoples and races was the rule. The Byzantine government could have settled many foreign peoples there in order to reinforce the devastated areas of the frontier, which are commonly termed “no-man’s land” in modern historiography. In fact, these displacements of populations among distant regions of the Empire or even the settlement of foreign nations in depopulated areas had been very common since the Arab invasions.³⁷

Accordingly, units of these foreigners under the high command of the generals of the themes of the Armeniakoi and Anatolikoi, but with some autonomy, might have been effective in the defence of the Empire, a circumstance that easily explains that their commanders or tourmarchai were promoted to the post of thematic generals and even crowned as emperors. They could be considered the forerunners of the epic akritai, and the defences, to whose establishment they contributed, could have later developed into the kleisurai or frontier districts. We shall see in Chapter 5.4 how the figure of Manuel the Armenian has been portrayed in the sources with elements common to the later frontier epic.

2.2 The Outbreak of the War at the East

Leo had every reason to entrust the command of the frontier regions in the east to his most loyal comrades, for it was precisely in the east that the civil war that shook the whole empire between 820 and 824 started, with an uprising of themata supported by foreign troops commanded by Thomas the Slav. Detailed reports about the main phases of the war have been preserved, mainly by the Continuator, but many aspects remain uncertain, such as the ultimate causes of the conflict and the identity of the rebels. We will approach some of these questions below in section 2.4 and again in Chapter 13, but for the moment we will concentrate on an apparently minor issue but one on which many others seem to be dependent, namely the exact year in which Thomas started his uprising.

According to the current *communis opinio*, Thomas the Slav rebelled against Michael the Amorian when he heard about the murder of Leo in the Christmas period of 820, so that Thomas would have taken up arms against Michael in order to avenge his late friend and comrade Leo.³⁸ This opinion is founded on reports preserved in the Continuator and Genesisios. However, there are also sources that date the uprising of Thomas as early as in Leo’s reign that cannot easily be explained away.³⁹

³⁷ For details see Ditten (1993).

³⁸ See Lemerle (1965) 272–3 and Köpstein (1983) 71–2.

³⁹ For a short comment on these sources see Signes Codoñer (1995) 225–7. See also Afinogenov (2005).

To begin with, we have the testimony of the letter Michael the Amorian sent to the emperor Louis the Pious in 824.⁴⁰ The Latin version of this letter informs us that Thomas had fled the empire during the reign of Eirene because of an accusation of adultery with his master's wife. Thomas supposedly resided many years in "Persian" lands and converted to Islam ("fidem Christi abnegans") to attract the unbelievers to his cause, although he pretended at the same time to be Constantine (VI), the son of Eirene, denying that the former had actually died in 797 after being blinded by his mother.⁴¹ Thomas is said to have led an uprising against Leo with the assistance of a number of peoples of the Middle East:

When the same Thomas, as he left Persia in the time of the aforementioned Leo with Saracens, Persians, Iberians, Armenians, Abasgians and the other people of the foreign nations, suddenly began to fight with these mighty forces, he subdued the whole duchy of Armenia to him by plundering, as well as the duchy of Chaldia, whose inhabitants have their abode in the Caucasus mountains, and also defeated the duke of the Armeniakoi with a mighty force.⁴²

The references seem to be very precise, although we cannot rule out that Michael's propaganda is at work here, as most scholars actually believe. In fact, Michael must have had much interest in denying any connection between Leo's murder, related to his subsequent accession to power, and Thomas' uprising, which fanned the flames of a devastating civil war until 823. Nevertheless, it must be doubted that to defend his cause Michael should resort to such a big distortion of the events, making Thomas' revolt take place as early as under Leo. He just needed to blame Thomas for treason and connivance with the Arabs to discredit him with Louis. But, is it really conceivable that Louis the Pious was so unaware of the events taking place in Byzantium that Michael could freely alter such substantial historical facts without being detected? We must remember that Constantinople had at the time close connections with Italy, especially Rome and Venice, and that Leo sent at least one embassy to Louis the Pious between 816 and 817.⁴³ It is perhaps worth mentioning that Leo passed an edict forbidding any travel to Egypt and Syria and communicated it to the Venetian doges, who implemented the

⁴⁰ Sode (2005) pleads for the inauthenticity of most of the contents of the letter, but her arguments seem to me unconvincing and not based upon the text. In any case, even if we admit that the text is not genuine, the details provided by it point to a well-informed contemporary source.

⁴¹ *Letter to Louis* 476.7–20.

⁴² *Letter to Louis* 476.20–25: "Cum idem Thomas exiens de Perside cum Sarracenis et Persis, Hiberis, Armeniis et Avasgiis et reliquis gentibus alienigenarum tempore predicti Leonis subito cum praedicta manu valida perproeliaret, direptione sibi subdidit totum Armoeniae ducatum, simul et ducatum Chaldaeae, quae gens montem Caucasum incolit, necnon et ducem Armeniacorum cum manu valida devicit."

⁴³ Müller (2009), *Regesten* 397–8.

measure and forced their subjects to obey the emperor's ban.⁴⁴ I suspect that Leo's order was related to the troubles triggered by Thomas's uprising in the Middle East, as we shall soon see.

Michael's letter goes on:

Therefore, when this happened in that way, the above mentioned Leo, for we want to leave out many events that took place then in the turmoil of the disgraces, as he was not able to stop the impetus of this tyrant and despaired of a recovery, was killed suddenly by some wicked persons in a conspiracy against him.⁴⁵

If we take the passage at its face value, the uprising of Thomas lasted some time before Leo was killed. In fact, Leo seemed even to "despair of a recovery". Michael suggests that the killing of Leo was prompted by his inability to cope with the rebels of the east. This version was evidently very convenient for Michael, as it enabled him to disentangle himself from the conspirators against Leo, but it is corroborated by at least one other contemporary source. This is the *Life of Euthymios*, one of the martyrs of the second iconoclasm, written c. 832 by Methodios, who was to be appointed patriarch in 843.

Methodios writes that Michael relaxed the persecution against icon worshippers in order to avoid any identification of his policy with that of Leo and also "due to the rebel, I mean the most fierce Thomas, who had already revolted before (ἤδη προεπαναστάντα), since the time of his predecessor (ἀπὸ τοῦ πρὸ αὐτοῦ)".⁴⁶ This piece of information confirms what Michael wrote in his *Letter to Louis*, for it presents the emperor distancing himself from Leo's policy and coping with Thomas' rebellion at the same time, as if both were part of the same legacy left behind by Leo after his death. Even more important is the fact that Methodios, an

⁴⁴ Müller (2009) *Regesten* 400. The source is Andreas Dandolo, *Chronica* 167 (Muratori) and 144.31–34 (Pastorello): "Hoc tempore, cum contigisset loca sancta, que erant Ierosolimis prophanari, Leo cum filio imperatores augusti eddictum proposuerunt ne quis in Syriam vel Egiptum auderet accedere; quod catholici duces Venecie aprobantes, subdictis suis pariter iuberunt." This is indeed a later source, for its author was doge of Venice between 1343 and 1354. However, he preserves sound data not recorded by other sources that concern the relations between Byzantium and Venice and were perhaps based on reliable documents of the Venetian chancellery. See also Chapter 18.2 for important details preserved in this chronicle about embassies of Theophilos to Venice after the defeat of Amorion in 838.

⁴⁵ *Letter to Louis* 476.26–29: "His ergo ita gestis, ut plurima omittamus propter superfluitatem verborum, quae in hac tempestate tribulationum contigerunt, eius tyranni impetum non valens memoratus Leo imperator sustinere et in his angustiis constitutus, de recuperatione desperans, a quibusdam improbis, coniuratione in eum facta, subito occisus est."

⁴⁶ Methodios, *Life of Euthymios* §10 (202–205): καὶ διὰ τὸν ἤδη προεπαναστάντα ἀπὸ τοῦ πρὸ αὐτοῦ ἀντάρτην, Θωμᾶν φημι τὸν δεινότατον. I have already commented on this important passage in Signes Codoñer (1995) 226–7. Afinogenov (2001) 335, note 36 also uses it for his argumentation.

iconophile, was not only witness to the events, but also had no interest at all in corroborating the propaganda of an iconoclast emperor if it did not tally with the truth. This is a clear confirmation that Thomas had already rebelled against Leo, as Michael wrote to Louis.

The Continuator and Genesisios collect two versions of Thomas' rebellion, whose beginning both authors reproduce side by side but in a different order.⁴⁷ The first version of the Continuator and the second of Genesisios present Thomas as rebelling against Leo. We could name it *version A* for the sake of convenience. On the contrary, the second version of the Continuator and the first of Genesisios, let's call it *version B*, presents Thomas' rebellion as starting during the reign of Michael of Amorion. Although most scholars favoured *version B*,⁴⁸ our two historians, on the contrary, seem to prefer *version A*: Genesisios calls it "more exact" (ἀκριβέστερον) and the Continuator says that "this first version, to which I give my credence, gets its certainty from some written sources" (ὁ μὲν οὖν εἰς καὶ πρῶτος λόγος, ᾧ καὶ ἐγὼ πείθομαι ἐξ ἐγγράφων τινῶν ἔχων τὸ βέβαιον). I reproduce here the crucial passage of *version A* as told by Genesisios, for it is more precise than the parallel passage in the Continuator:⁴⁹

[Thomas] then invaded the Roman Empire ... At this time Leo was emperor, who was the son of the Patrikios Bardas and whose family was descended from Armenians. Leo did not consider this attack on the Romans to be worthy of consideration, and he put together a small army on the spur of the moment, entrusted it to a man who was a soldier rather than a general, and sent him out against Thomas. And when the two armies clashed somewhere in the East, the imperial army was defeated and routed. Unopposed, Thomas overran the entire East and forced the inhabitants to take his side. Shortly thereafter Michael both killed Leo and was elevated to the throne.⁵⁰

That the rebellion of Thomas the Slav began during Leo's reign is also stated in the *Acta of David, Symeon and George*. This work has usually been disregarded, for it was written in the eleventh century or later and presents important inconsistencies that have led some scholars to consider it a piece of fantasy. However, there are also specific details in the work that suggest that its author used old sources for his composition.⁵¹ It is therefore not without interest that

⁴⁷ Th. Cont. II.9–12 (49.20–55.11) and Gen. II.2, 4 (23.80–24.22 and 25.50–26.83). For a detailed comment about these two versions see Signes Codoñer (1995) 217–46.

⁴⁸ Lemerle (1965), Köpstein (1983) and Treadgold (1988) 228–9 and note 312.

⁴⁹ The only piece of information added by the Continuator is that the rebellion of Thomas took place in the last part of Leo's reign: Th. Cont. II.10 (52.2) ἐν ὑστέρῳ καιρῷ.

⁵⁰ Gen. II.4–5 (26.76–85) in the translation of Kaldellis (1998) 32.

⁵¹ For a brief assessment of the *status quaestionis* see the introduction of D. Abrahamse and D. Domingo-Forasté to their translation of the *Life* edited in Talbot (1998) 143–241, esp. 143–8.

this work describes the problem caused by Thomas' uprising as "having taken its beginning when the tyrant Leo was still living among men" (ἔτι μὲν ἐν ἀνθρώποις τοῦ τυράννου τελούντος Λέοντος τὴν ἀρχὴν λαβόν);⁵² or that it indicates that the exiled Thomas, after having remained among the Ismaelites during the regnal years of Nikephoros, Staurakios and Michael (Rhangabe) and "also of Leo the usurper, for a long time" (καὶ τοῖς τοῦ ἀντάρτου Λέοντος μέχρι πολλοῦ), gathered a big army "toward the end [of the reign/of the life] of this (=Leo)" (πρὸς τῷ τέλει δὲ τούτου) and appeared (on the borders of) the theme named after the Armeniakoi. However, only after "Michael had *already* ascended to the throne" (τοῦ δὲ Μιχαὴλ ἤδη τῆς βασιλείας ἐπιβάντος) "did he disclose his ambitions, proceed further and seem to pretend the imperial power" (παρρησιάζεται καὶ πρὸς τὰ πρόσω χωρεῖ καὶ τῆς βασιλείου ἀρχῆς ἐπιτυγχάνειν δοκεῖ).⁵³

A version of the *Martyrion* of the 42 saints of Amorion must also be considered, for Thomas the Slav is again presented in it as rebelling against Leo.⁵⁴ Less value is to be given to a passage preserved in a short chronicle of the Byzantine emperors whereby Thomas rebels in the reign of Leo V (ἐπὶ τούτου) but also besieges Constantinople and is finally defeated by the same emperor.⁵⁵ Obviously we can explain this error as some kind of casting-forward of the events starting from the outbreak of the civil war during Leo's reign, but we are entitled to do so only because of the previous evidence.

Finally, an unexpected source appears in the well-known oracles attributed to Leo VI. W.G. Brokkaar recently dated some of the oracles of this collection, specifically numbers 1–6, to the reign of Leo V, some time after the re-establishment of iconoclasm in 815, when Leo was still alive. It is interesting that Leo is represented as the last true emperor coming before the Antichrist, to which Oracle 6 is devoted.⁵⁶ With the coming of the Antichrist, crowns encircling the sun will appear, which will "bring about a division of the whole state" (μερισμὸν ἐνφέρουσι τοῦ κράτους ὅλου).⁵⁷ Although Brokkaar did not notice it, this appears to be a clear reference to the civil war, thus confirming that Thomas rebelled against Leo.

The possibility that all these sources are based on the official version of Michael, as suggested by Lemerle, is highly unlikely, not only because none of them appears to know the *Letter to Louis*, but also because they have no reason to trust the propaganda of the iconoclast emperor against other versions. But if we give credence to these sources and admit that Thomas the Slav had already rebelled against Leo,

⁵² *Acta of David, Symeon and George*, 231.23–24.

⁵³ *Acta of David, Symeon and George*, 232.3–13.

⁵⁴ *Acta Mart. Amoriensium*, versio Z, 64.26–28: ὁμῶς γοῦν ἐπαφεῖται καὶ τούτῳ [=Leo] ἡ τοῦ τυράννου ἐκείνου Θωμᾶ ἐπιθεσις, τῷ ἐμφυλίῳ πολέμῳ τὰς Ῥωμαϊκὰς δυναστείας συνδιαφθείρουσα.

⁵⁵ Cumont (1894) 33.

⁵⁶ Brokkaar (2002) 32–44.

⁵⁷ Brokkaar (2002) 66–7.

how can we explain that other texts, and especially *version B* of Continuator and Genesios, date the outbreak of the civil war only after Leo's murder?

The problem might be approached in terms of labelling the events. If we speak of "civil war", we must take for granted that Thomas the Slav, as a usurper, claimed the imperial crown in Constantinople. However, this might not necessarily have been his initial purpose when he took up arms against the imperial army. In fact, the first clashes between Thomas' troops and Leo's army (alluded to in Michael's *Letter to Louis*) could have been limited to "local fighting", as customarily practiced by Arab raiders in the summer season. If we give credence to the long stay of Thomas among the Arabs, of which more will be said in Chapter 13.1, he may not have rebelled against Leo in Anatolia, but invaded the empire departing from the caliphate. The idea of proclaiming himself emperor may have arisen not with the first skirmishes but after some fighting, as the *Acta of David, Symeon and George* expressly say. Apparently, Leo did not initially consider the conflict grave enough and sent a small contingent to combat Thomas. The massive attack Thomas made against Constantinople at the very beginning of Michael's reign came later and needed some time to be prepared.

If we dissociate the person of Thomas the Slav from the person of Thomas the Armenian, who was effectively appointed tourmarches of the phoideratoi, it is possible to consider that it was indeed Thomas the Armenian who rebelled after Leo's death when he heard of his murder by Michael. The note by the Continuator and Michael that Thomas rebelled against Michael out of hatred for him and because he wanted to avenge Leo⁵⁸ would therefore apply to the Armenian Thomas, not to the Slav. The confusion between these two persons, whom we will discuss further in Chapter 13, allows us to suppose that Thomas the Armenian rebelled early in 821 probably by joining the invasion of Thomas the Slav, with whom he was inextricably confounded by later writers.

2.3 An Army of Barbarians?

The distinction of Thomas the Armenian from Thomas the Slav allows us to reconsider anew the origins of his uprising. We have already established in section 2.1 that Thomas the Slav rose in arms under Leo V. In Chapter 13.1 we will be able to establish to what extent Thomas was backed by the Abbasid caliphate and see that his usurpation could in fact be labelled as an invasion rather than a civil war. Then, we will analyse the conflict under the broader perspective of the continuous warfare between the Arabs and Byzantines that lasted until the very end of the reign of Theophilos. There is, however, another angle to be considered now, namely the support given to the usurpation of Thomas by some peoples and nations of eastern Anatolia, as reflected in Christian sources. The point to be

⁵⁸ Th. Cont. II.11 (52.12–14) and Gen. II.2 (23.80–86).

checked is whether some areas to the east of Byzantium could become a source of unrest and destabilization for the empire, even more than the caliphate itself.

As we have already seen in section 2.1, the *Letter to Louis* mentioned the presence of “Saracens, Persians, Iberians, Armeniakoi, Abasgians and the other people of the foreign nations” among those serving in Thomas’ army. This information was accepted by Paul Lemerle as far as it refers to the Caucasians (Iberians, Armenians and Abasgians). He did not accept, however, that Arab troops played a significant role in the invasion.⁵⁹ We will consider this last point, as already mentioned, in Chapter 13.2. It is the presence of contingents other than Arabs in Thomas’ army that will be our concern now.

The Continuator mentions among Thomas’ followers Arabs from the territories bordering the Empire but also from more distant lands (Ἀγαρηγῶν μόνων τούτων δὴ τῶν ἡμῖν γειτονούντων καὶ ὁμορούντων, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτῶν τῶν ἐνδότερον οἰκούντων), as well as Egyptians, Indians, Persians, Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldians, Iberians, Zechoi, Kabeiroi (Αἰγυπτίων, Ἰνδῶν, Περσῶν, Ἀσσυρίων, Ἀρμενίων, Χάλδων, Ἰβήρων, Ζηγῶν, Καβείρων) and all kinds of followers of Mani (πάντων δὴ τῶν τοῖς Μάνεντος συστοιχούντων δόγμασι καὶ θεσπίσμασι).⁶⁰ The same list appears in Genesios with some more names inserted at different points: Abasgians (cited also by Michael’s *Letter to Louis*), Slavs, Huns, Vandals, Getai, Lazians and Alans.⁶¹ Scholars consider these two lists, especially the one by Genesios, rhetorical to a great extent, as amplifications of the shorter one provided by the *Letter to Louis*.⁶² Grégoire even suggested that some oral source underlay them.⁶³ Nonetheless, some of the names given are anything but common and would hardly be recognizable by a standard Byzantine reader, so we should not so easily discard the list as a fanciful product of the imagination of our two historians. A closer examination of the names of the nations is worth pursuing.

We can distinguish several groups in the nations apparently supporting Thomas’ army. The first is composed of peoples from Byzantium’s eastern periphery, maybe dissatisfied with Constantinople’s policy and administration but not necessarily with Leo’s iconoclasm. These are mostly peoples of the Caucasus region, such as the Armenians, Chaldians, Iberians, Zechoi, and Kabeiroi named by the Continuator, to which we can add the Abasgians, Lazians and Alans named by Genesios.

From this list only the names of Zechoi and Kabeiroi present some difficulty. The Zechoi (Ζηγῶν in the Continuator) could be identified with the Zichi or

⁵⁹ Lemerle (1965) 285–7.

⁶⁰ Th. Cont. II.12 (55.4–8). For a comment on this list cf. Signes Codoñer (1995) 239–41 and 245–6.

⁶¹ Gen. II.2 (24.17–21): μετ’ Ἀγαρηγῶν Ἰνδῶν Αἰγυπτίων Ἀσσυρίων Μήδων Ἀβασίων Ζηγῶν Ἰβήρων Καβείρων Σκλάβων Οὐννων Βανδήλων Γετῶν καὶ ὅσοι τῆς Μάνεντος βδελυρίας μετέχον, Λαζῶν τε καὶ Ἀλανῶν Χαλδῶν τε καὶ Ἀρμενίων καὶ ἐτέρων παντοίων ἐθνῶν.

⁶² Lemerle (1965) 265, note 36 and 271, note 65 and Köpstein (1983) 78, note 111.

⁶³ Vasiliev (1935) vol. 1, 31, note 2.



Map 1 Peoples supposedly recruited in Thomas' army as mentioned by the Continuator and Genesios

Circassians, named after the Turkish word *Çerkes* that designates some tribes of the northwestern Caucasus, and specially the Adyghs and their related neighbours, the Kabardians. More problematic is the reference to the *Kabeiroi*. Whereas the Continuator has *Καβείρων*, the manuscript of Genesios reads *Σαβήρων*. The last name immediately recalls the Sabirs or Sabirian Huns, a Turkish tribe known to the Byzantines in Late Antiquity⁶⁴ and also living in the northwestern Caucasus. But this could be an emendation by the antiquarian Genesios of his source text, since the manuscripts of Skylitzes, who copies from the Continuator, have *Καβείρων* or *Καβήρων*. Accordingly, if the Continuator did not in turn make a mistake when copying from his source (a mistake repeated by Skylitzes), we must consider *Καβείρων* as the right reading and suppose that Genesios substituted the well-known Sabirs for the unknown *Kabeiroi*. In this case, who were these *Kabeiroi*?

The name could refer to the Kabars, a branch of the Khazars, who moved to the west perhaps at the beginning of the ninth century as a result of an internal crisis of the khaganate. We will consider in Chapter 20.2 the problems related to this crisis, but for the moment it suffices to say that while the direct presence of tribes of the Khazars in Thomas' army may be important for the so-called Khazar question, it is by no means assured, for the vocalism *α* appearing in Byzantine sources referring

⁶⁴ See Malalas XVIII.70 (394.13): Οὐννοι Σάβηρες.

to the Kabars⁶⁵ does not fit with the vocalism ε/η found in our text, although a confusion between α and ε is easy to explain palaeographically. However, to identify these Kabeiroi as the inhabitants of Neo-Kaisareia, whose ancient name is Kabeira (Καβείρα) and borders Chaldia on the west, seems odd, for the name was not used at the time.⁶⁶ Skylitzes refers to the Καβείροι along with Arabs, Turks and Persians in a later context, but their identity is not clear.⁶⁷ Some connection with the Arabic *kafir*, “unbeliever”, could be also possible.⁶⁸ However, we do not know of any specific people to whom this designation could apply.

In any case, some of the peoples listed by our two historians are located in the northwestern Caucasus, namely Iberians, Zechoi, Abasgians, Lazians, Alans, and eventually the Sabirs/Kabirs/Kafirs (see Map 1). Therefore the possibility of identifying the Huns mentioned by Genesios with the north Caucasian Huns is to be considered, although this people is not recorded after the seventh century, probably because it was incorporated into the Khazar khaganate.⁶⁹ But the name may refer to the Hungarians, who along with the aforementioned Kabars rebelled against the Khazars, perhaps as early as the beginning of the ninth century.⁷⁰

It is interesting to note that all these peoples or tribes were related to or subjects of the Khazars, the dominant power north of the Caucasus. So, certainly, were the Iranian Alans of the Caucasus.⁷¹ The Abasgians (cited by Genesios and the *Letter to Louis*) are today named Abkhazians and border the Georgians, who were also certainly subject to the Khazars at the time. Their ruler Leo II governed the territory in 810–811 and 837 as a dependency of Khazaria (see Chapter 15.2). The same can probably be said of their neighbours the Lazians and also of the already discussed Zechoi and Sabirs. It is also possible that the Slavs mentioned by Genesios as supporters of Thomas refer not to the tribes of the Balkans, but to the eastern Slavs paying tribute to the Khazars (see Chapter 20.1).

It could also be that the presence of these peoples at Thomas’ side reflects somehow the alliance of the rebel with the mighty power to the north of the Caucasus. The Khazars had frequently been involved in Byzantine affairs since Herakleios’ time in the seventh century. It suffices to mention here the marriage of

⁶⁵ See *De administrando imperio* 39 and 40 with repeated mentions of the Κάβαροι.

⁶⁶ *RE* X.2 col. 1397.

⁶⁷ Skyl., *Konstantinos Monomachos* 9 (445.55) and 13 (449.81).

⁶⁸ The Greek beta was pronounced at this time as voiced bilabial fricative [v] and therefore close to the voiceless labiodental fricative [f].

⁶⁹ See Moravcsik (1958) vol. 2, 231–7, who considers that there are no mentions later than the seventh century of the Huns living east of the Maeotid sea and that most of the references to Huns in the ninth century are to the Bulgarians. For the close connections between Khazars and Huns see Dunlop (1954) 6–8, 27–8, 33, 43–4.

⁷⁰ Kristó (1996) 57–95 and Róna-Tas (2007) 274–5. See Chapter 19.2.

⁷¹ Alemany (2000) 180–81, Brook (2006) 138–9 and especially Arzhantseva (2007) 59–60, who distinguishes between eastern Alans inhabiting the area around the Darial pass and dependent on the Khazars, and pro-Byzantine western Alans inhabiting the upper Kuban valley and mostly independent.

a Khazar princess to the emperor Constantine V.⁷² They were naturally concerned about their southern frontier, as most of their imports came through the Caucasus. As a result, many Khazars settled in the north Caucasus and led military expeditions further south.⁷³ A Khazar army had in fact invaded Muslim country as far as the river Araxes in Azerbaijan in 799.⁷⁴ The supposition that the Khazars backed Thomas' usurpation and even sent warriors of their multi-ethnic empire to support him must remain unconfirmed for Khazars are not named either by our two historians or by any other source as having played any role in the events, as would be expected, for they were the major power in the region.⁷⁵ However, if the peoples listed by our two historians and in the *Letter to Louis* were effectively supporting Thomas, this could not have happened without the Khazars' consent.

Apart from these peoples, Armenians also appear in the lists of Thomas' fighters. These must be linked with the inhabitants of the frontier thema of Chaldia, where many Armenians were living. As the *Letter to Louis* mentions that Thomas fought initially in Armenia and Chaldia during Leo's reign, it can be admitted without problem that he gained the support of the populations there for his massive attack against Constantinople as early as during Michael II's reign.⁷⁶

Finally, we must add the reference to the Manicheans. They come last in the list of the Continuator, who refers to "all those who followed the doctrines and decrees of Manes".⁷⁷ We find the same mention in Genesios but before the names of Lazians, Alans, Chaldians and Armenians. The Paulikianoi are surely referred to here.⁷⁸ This dualist sect with some centuries of history behind it was ruled between 801 and 835 by the "heresiarch" Sergios, surnamed Tychikos (a disciple of Saint Paul mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles). Sergios had begun to rule over the Paulician church in Koinochorion, in the district of Neo-Kaisareia, when the sect was still tolerated by the Byzantine authorities, who probably followed for some time the same indulgent policy the Isaurians adopted in the eighth century towards some minorities considered crucial for preserving stability at the eastern border of the empire.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, Michael I Rhangabe probably began to prosecute these minorities, Paulikianoi and Athinganoi especially, during his short reign (811–813). Leo the Armenian continued to prosecute them according to Peter of Sicily, the main source for the Paulikianoi at this period. This caused the Paulikianoi to move

⁷² For an assessment of the relations between Khazars and Byzantines during the first decades of the ninth century, see Chapters 19–20.

⁷³ Brook (2006) 180–81. See further Dunlop (1954) 46–88 for the conflicts between Khazars and Arabs around the Caucasus.

⁷⁴ Dunlop (1954) 183–5 and Brook (2006) 132.

⁷⁵ Unless we consider that the Huns named by Genesios are in fact our Khazars!

⁷⁶ *Letter to Louis* 476.23–25.

⁷⁷ Th. Cont. II.12 (55.8–9).

⁷⁸ For the Paulikianoi see Garsoïan (1960), Lemerle (1973), Barnard (1974) and Ludwig (1998). For a broader perspective see the older study of Runciman (1947).

⁷⁹ For the history of the Paulikianoi at this period I follow Garsoïan (1960) 119–20 and 124–5.

eastwards and establish themselves outside the imperial territory. Sergios took refuge in the domain of the Arab emir of Melitene and settled in Argaous, some 30 km to the north of Melitene. From there the Paulikianoi led raids on imperial territory. When these raids began is not altogether clear, but Peter of Sicily refers to ‘Umar ibd ‘Abdallāh ibn Marwān al-Aqtā’, known as Monocherares (Μονοχεράρης), who had governed Melitene since the 830s.⁸⁰ Thus, although the connection between the Paulikianoi and Thomas is not explicitly made,⁸¹ it could be taken for granted that if there were Paulikianoi settled in the area at the time (and that seems to be very likely), they sided with Thomas. Moreover, the Melitene region needed to be secured by Thomas as an ally before risking any invasion into Byzantine lands.

The sources inform us of further persecution of the Paulikianoi in the reign of Theophilos, thus confirming that they continued to be a serious problem in the area during the whole period, long before the major wars conducted against them during the reign of Basil I. Thus, in the *Life of Makarios*, the abbot of the Bithynian monastery of Pelekete, the hagiographer Sabas tells us that when Makarios was put in jail in Constantinople (ἐν τῷ δεσμοτηρίῳ) by the emperor Theophilos because of his adherence to icon worship, some “Paulikianoi or Manicheans” (Παυλιανιστῶν ... ἤτοι Μανιχαίων) were also imprisoned there, waiting for the execution of the death sentence (τὴν ἐπὶ θάνατον ψῆφον) that had been imposed on them. The saint succeeded in converting one of them, who was the only one to escape capital punishment.⁸² This is clear proof of Theophilos’ concern with the increasing activity of the Paulikianoi on the eastern border of the empire.

Even more interesting are the details about the Paulikianoi provided by the version Γ of the *Acta Martyrum Amoriensium*.⁸³ This version, centred on the life of Kallistos, refers to Theophilos sending him as dux to Koloneia, where the future martyr found that “some of the officers had become infected with the illness of the Manichean heresy” (τινας τῶν ἐν ἀξιώμασι τὴν τῶν Μανιχαίων νοσοῦντας αἴρεσιν). The saint tried first to convert them but he gave up before their contumacy. They then planned to betray him and, profiting from some military encounter with the enemy, they handed him over “to some of their Manichean co-religionists, who after leaving Christian customs and territory because of their impiety, had submitted themselves to the rule of the bloodthirsty nation of Hagar” (τοῖς συμμύσταις αὐτῶν Μανιχαίοις, οἱ τὰ Χριστιανῶν καὶ ἔθνη καὶ ὄρια διὰ τῶν σφῶν ἀπολιπόντες δυσσέβειαν ὑποσπόνδους ἑαυτοὺς πεποιήκασι τοῖς ἐκ τῆς Ἄγαρ αἰμοχαρέςιν ἔθνεσιν). The hagiographer adds that Karbeas, the leader of these Paulikianoi living under the Arabs, put Kallistos in prison with some of his

⁸⁰ *PmbZ* #8552 and *PBE* s.v. “Monocherares 1”.

⁸¹ Garsoïan (1960) 124, note 47 is however certain that the Paulikianoi took part in the rebellious army of Thomas.

⁸² Sabas, *Life of Makarios* 13–14 (159.5–19). See *PmbZ* #4672 and *PBE* s.v. “Makarios 9”.

⁸³ See also Chapter 8.1 for this work.

servants. However, the caliph was soon informed of the importance of the person captured by the Paulikianoi and an order was given to bring him as soon as possible to Syria, where he joined in prison the officers taken captive in Amorion.⁸⁴

As we see, the Paulikianoi had not only infiltrated the Byzantine army, but also actively collaborated with the Arabs and worked under their protection in the border areas of northern Syria. It is understandable that Theophilos took the situation very seriously and condemned some of them to capital punishment, as the *Life of Makarios* has shown. More important for us now is the pattern provided by the Paulikianoi, that of a dissident movement sustained by the rival empire (the caliphate) in order to undermine the defences of the enemy (the Byzantines) at the border line. The kind of massive military campaigns Ma'mūn and Mu'tašim led against Theophilos in the years 830, 832, 833 and 838 (see Chapters 14 and 17) are perhaps inconceivable without some collaboration with the border populations. Retrospectively, it seems unlikely that Thomas' invasion of Anatolia could have taken place without the support of these frontier peoples. The mention of the Manicheans by Genesisos and the Continuator as supporters of Thomas accordingly makes perfect sense.

There are further nations mentioned only by Genesisos that may have been included as a rhetorical amplification of the original list, peoples such as Vandals and Getai, but also Slavs and Huns if we discard the connection of these last two with the Khazars, as suggested earlier. In fact, all these four nations are mentioned together by Genesisos, before the reference to the Manicheans. However, even if we assume that Genesisos added these peoples to a previous list just to exhibit his knowledge before his readers,⁸⁵ their inclusion nonetheless makes sense. The presence of Slavs could have been induced by Thomas's origin and also by the participation of the Slavic tribes of Thrace in the final part of the conflict, as Thomas installed his headquarters in Adrianopolis.⁸⁶ Less logical are the references to the Getai and the Vandals, which fit in well with the antiquarian taste of Genesisos, who was fond of inserting geographical and etymological explanations for the place names.⁸⁷ In any case, by the Getai, Genesisos was referring to a people living probably north of the Danube in a land by then occupied by Slavs and Hungarians. By the Vandals, he meant the people living in North Africa,⁸⁸ ruled

⁸⁴ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 29.1–32.

⁸⁵ This is not so evident, for the Continuator does not include the Abasgians in his list and they appear in Genesisos and the *Letter to Louis*. Thus, at least in this case, the Continuator seems to have suppressed the reference to the Abasgians from his source whereas Genesisos preserved it.

⁸⁶ For the close relations between Slavs and Khazars in the steppes see however Kalinina (2007).

⁸⁷ Signes Codoñer (1995) 671.

⁸⁸ Alemany (2000) 181 mentions that groups of Vandals took part in the defence of the themes of Asia Minor after the campaigns of Belisarios.

by the Aghlabids at the time.⁸⁹ It appears highly improbable that Thomas was reinforced by troops coming from the Dniester and from Africa. Maybe Genesios was simply marking a connection between Thomas' invasion and other events of the period, such as the fighting north of the Danube between Hungarians and Byzantines deported there since Krum's time (see Chapter 20.1) or the invasion of Crete, carried out by Spaniards who had close connections with the Aghlabids (see Chapter 13.3), but this may presuppose too much thinking on his part. The most prudent conclusion is therefore to think that Genesios rhetorically added these four references to "Slavs, Huns, Vandals and Getai" (Σκλάβων Οὐννων Βανδήλων Γετῶν) just to broaden the historical dimensions of the conflict. Their grouping and the absence of any correspondence with the list of the Continuator suggest this. The addition may have been inspired by some historical events, but this does not mean that Genesios here reflects historical truth.

2.4 Fracture in the Empire

Undoubtedly, the support of caliph Ma'mūn for the usurper Thomas, enabling the presence of important contingents of Muslim fighters among Thomas's troops, explains Thomas' strength and his initial victories, a problem we will approach in Chapter 13.1–2. However, the rebels continued to fight strenuously even after Thomas' death, both in Thrace and eastern Anatolia: there must have been a cause for that beyond Ma'mūn's support, a cause that seems to bear no connection at all with icon worship. This cause is not mentioned in any account of the conflict, perhaps because Byzantine historians classified the historical processes according to the usual categories of historiography. For them there was no need to go beyond the label of "usurpation" when describing the imperial ambitions of Thomas. They apparently did not need causes to explain how a usurper's invasion backed by the Arabs became the "civil war" they describe in very vivid terms. Only if the civil war had been prompted by religious considerations could we have expected some references to this aspect. But this was clearly not the case, as icons are practically absent from the accounts of the civil war except for two or three scant allusions. It is accordingly extremely difficult for a modern historian to ascertain the real motives for the crisis in the conventional narrative of the contemporary sources. However, although the evidence is lacking, some points may be briefly assessed.

Tensions between the east and west of the empire may explain to a certain extent the support Thomas found for his cause among the eastern nations named by the sources we have just considered in section 2.3. Certainly, Thomas found supporters also in Macedonia and Thrace during the conflict, but it is to be suspected that this was only a consequence of his previous victories in Anatolia,

⁸⁹ Alemany (2000) conjectures that it is feasible to recognize in the Getai the Crimean Goths.

as he had enough money for paying soldiers in the west.⁹⁰ It is interesting in this regard to consider how Genesios describes Thomas' rebellion:

None of those who originated in the east, or in the west itself, failed to support him, neither did foreign nations that had come to dwell in the Empire, nor its own natives, nor its neighbours, nor any slaves that hated their masters, nor entire nations, nor all those who rushed to him at various times and followed him, some fighting by land and some by sea. He seemed to be a new Xerxes, although one of the same faith, and therefore all the themes hurried to ally themselves with him along with their Strategoi. Only Olbianos, the strategos of the Armeniakon theme, kept his troops in line by his shrewdness, and also Katakylas, the strategos of the Opsikion theme, and they both remained loyal to Michael.⁹¹

Apparently everybody supported Thomas, in the east as well as in the west. However, if we look at the passage with some attention, Genesios declares first that “none of those who originated in the east failed to support Thomas” (οὐδεὶς δὲ τῶν ἐξ ἀνατολῆς ὠρμημένων ἀπελιμπάνετο), and only then adds “and from the west itself” (οὐδὲ τῆς ἐσπέρας αὐτῆς), as a kind of further precision. That this precision was not casual becomes clear when we compare this passage with the parallel text of the Continuator, who relied on the same source:

He prevailed with persuasion and a certain amiability upon those who had desire for a new state of affairs and their own enrichment, but with force and against the will of those who had already had bad experience of civil revolts. Hence did servants raise murderous hands against their masters, and the soldier against his sergeant, and the captain against his general, until all of Asia was submerged in moaning. Some cities with all their inhabitants took Thomas's side, won over by fear, but others often resisted, keeping faith with the emperor, and were subsequently subdued with much slaughter and enslavement. Nevertheless, all Asia followed him, except for Katakylas, general of the Opsikion and Olbianos of the Armeniakoi, for these generals proved to be the only who kept faith with Michael.⁹²

Here any reference to support from the west has disappeared. The Continuator says only that all Asia followed Thomas (πᾶσα Ἀσία ὀπίσω τούτου ἐγένετο). Moreover, the text also says that many people were in fact obliged to support Thomas “with force and against their will” (βίᾳ καὶ γνώμῃ ἀβουλήτω), for they had already had bad experiences in civil wars. This can only signify that they were unwilling to lend support to any tentative push against the emperor.⁹³ The Continuator even

⁹⁰ This is expressly stated by Th. Cont. II.11 (53.6–9) and Gen. II.2 (23.90–93).

⁹¹ Gen. II.2 (23.93–24.7) in the translation of Kaldellis (1998) 28.

⁹² Th. Cont. I.11 (53.10–54.2).

⁹³ As we consider in Chapter 5.2, it is likely that Michael did not have time to appoint new commanders to all of the themes except precisely for Katakylas and Olbianos.

mentions that many cities supported the usurper out of convenience, “persuaded by fear” (τῷ φόβῳ πεισθεῖσαι). Inhabitants of other cities were slaughtered and enslaved after resisting the usurper. These cities are not further identified, but it is immediately after this remark that the Continuator refers to the continuing support of all Asia for Thomas despite his harshness (πλὴν ἀλλὰ πᾶσα Ἀσία ...). It seems that Thomas’ eastern troops found some difficulties even in subduing part of Anatolia, probably the more crowded cities of the western part.

The *Life of Peter of Atroa*, written by Sabas as early as 847,⁹⁴ has preserved some stories of personal resistance against Thomas among the inhabitants of northwest Anatolia that are perhaps worth mentioning here. In fact, only two persons are clearly mentioned who followed Thomas in the area. The first case concerns the son of a consul who entered Thomas’ army (πρὸς τὸν στρατὸν τοῦ τυράννου Θωμᾶ ἑαυτὸν προσμίξας ὁ νεώτερος τὴν πόλιν περιεκαθέζετο) and even participated in the siege of Constantinople.⁹⁵ The second case is a notary from Lydia named Zacharias who also sided with Thomas and, after being captured by the emperor Michael, was imprisoned on an island.⁹⁶ A third case is more speculative, for it refers to a protospatharios named Staurakios who was accused of conspiracy against the emperor, although we do not know whether the accusation held true or even the motives behind it. The date of this conspiracy is not known and therefore its connection with the civil war remains unsupported.⁹⁷

Against these isolated cases we have in the *Life of Peter of Atroa* many instances of people being affected by the invasion and opposing Thomas’ soldiers. These people are soldiers, officials, monks, and even peasants like the one who could not sow his land for three years. Reading the *Life* one gets the impression that most of the population of northwest Anatolia was against the invasion of “eastern peoples”. It is perhaps no coincidence that Sabas names Thomas’ partisans “Hagarenes” or “Ismaelites”, just like his contemporary, Theodore Stoudites, does (see Chapter 13).

It can also be doubted that people in Thrace supported Thomas simply out of sympathy for his cause when he landed there, after crossing from Asia. The Continuator says that when the emperor heard that Thomas was about to land in Thrace,

... going round all of Thrace, he incited the more powerful to resist the rebel and exhorted them to espouse his cause unto shedding their blood, betraying neither the emperor’s faith nor their own courage and virtue. But his aspect seemed to many as one who had no part in battle; and therefore, after Michael had withdrawn to the imperial city and Thomas appeared, all readily went over to his side, without a word being said (τοῦ Θωμᾶ δὲ κατὰ πρόσωπον περισταμένου,

⁹⁴ Brubaker and Haldon (2001) 224 consider it “an informative *Life* containing much information about the monastic and political-economic life of the period”.

⁹⁵ Sabas, *Life of Petros of Atroa* (1), §36.

⁹⁶ Sabas, *Life of Petros of Atroa* (1), §39.

⁹⁷ Sabas, *Life of Petros of Atroa* (1), §57.

μεταθέσθαι συνέβη πάντας εὐκόλως, ὡς μηδὲ λόγου δεηθῆναι), and they joined the expedition led by him against the imperial city.⁹⁸

Genesios' account is very similar, but it contains some additional interesting details. According to the historian, when Thomas landed in Thrace,

... he there found that all the Thracians had declared for him (κατηκόους αὐτῷ), even though the emperor, when he had learned that the rebel was crossing the straits at Abydos with his ships, had marched against him with a very small force (ὀλιγίστῳ στρατῷ) exacting guarantees from all the cities in Thrace that they would remain faithful to him. But all of these cities set little store by their promises and went over to the tyrant whose forces they thus augmented.⁹⁹

We now hear that the emperor had few troops at his disposal for "persuading" the inhabitants of Thrace to support him. It comes as no surprise that these went over to the usurper so easily. This means only that they sought their own convenience, nothing more.

Things, however, began to change as Constantinople unexpectedly resisted Thomas' assaults and the siege became prolonged. Some of Thomas' sailors willingly deserted to Michael when their ships, in flight before the imperial fleet, made land near the city walls.¹⁰⁰ Thereafter Gregory Pterotos abandoned Thomas with his own troops and began to negotiate a possible surrender with Michael. Before they came to an agreement Thomas defeated and killed the deserter with part of the troops that he withdrew from the siege of the capital.¹⁰¹ Although the siege continued after that, Thomas was to experience defeat after defeat, first at sea and then on land, especially after the Bulgarian khan Omurtag attacked him from Thrace. These failures caused massive desertions in Thomas' army, from the soldiers who fought the Bulgarians¹⁰² as well as from the fleet that laid siege to Constantinople.¹⁰³ During a pitched battle between them and Michael's troops on the Diabasis plain (30 miles west of Constantinople), many soldiers in Thomas' army again took flight without fighting and joined the emperor. The Continuator even describes at this point and at some length the demoralization of Thomas' soldiers, men who had initially thought of fighting a short campaign, but in the end found themselves involved in a long war, deprived of their wives and children for many years and at the will of a single man's wishes and madness (ἀνδρὸς ἐνὸς ἐπιθυμία

⁹⁸ Th. Cont. II.13 (57.3–6).

⁹⁹ Gen. II.5 (27.8–14), trans. Kaldellis (1998) 33.

¹⁰⁰ Th. Cont. II.15 (62.13–14) and Gen. II.6 (28.69–29.70)

¹⁰¹ Th. Cont. II.16 (62.19–63.18). Gen. II.6 (29.70–74) does not include these details, but only an abridged version of the events.

¹⁰² Th. Cont. II.17 (66.5–8) and Gen. II.7 (30.9).

¹⁰³ Th. Cont. II.17 (66.11–13) and Gen. II.7 (29.5).

καὶ ἀπονοίᾳ δουλεύοντες).¹⁰⁴ According to Genesios, the emperor enlisted these new deserters in his own army and continued the war against Thomas with them.¹⁰⁵

Unexpectedly, although Thomas' cause seemed to be lost, he continued to resist and retired with a few men to Arkadiopolis,¹⁰⁶ whereas his adopted son Anastasios took refuge in nearby Byzes. Thomas was the first to fall into the hands of the emperor, for the harshness of the siege of Arkadiopolis moved his men to hand him over to the emperor, who had promised to pardon them of all their faults.¹⁰⁷ When the news of Thomas' capture at Arkadiopolis reached his men in Byzes, they in turn betrayed his son Anastasios and surrendered him to the emperor Michael.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, not all of Thomas' soldiers betrayed him in these last stages of the war, for some of the defenders of Arkadiopolis, after leaving the city under the emperor's guarantee of immunity, hurried to join Anastasios' troops in Byzes.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, after the capture and ensuing death of Thomas and Anastasios, some of their partisans resisted for some time longer in Panion and Herakleia on the north coast of the Sea of Marmara.¹¹⁰

What could have moved these men to continue the fight under such desperate conditions? The emperor promised amnesty and pardon to all the followers of Thomas and he seems to have effectively kept his word, so that there was apparently no reason to continue the war. Probably the high officials and commandants in Thomas' army tried to avoid defections by harsh measures against the half-hearted and traitors, but this is perhaps not enough to explain the apparently unexpected resistance of the Thomasians in Arkadiopolis.

The Continuator, who usually embellishes his narrative with reflections of his own, seems also to have seriously considered this question, for he wonders about the motives that pushed these men to continue fighting until the end. He says that perhaps they were all moved by their innate hatred of Michael (τοσοῦτον ἄρα μῖσος κατὰ τοῦ Μιχαῆλ πᾶσιν ἐνέφου), but mainly because they did not want to follow his iconoclastic policy.¹¹¹ This last cannot be true, for no mention of this point is made during the whole account of the civil war. And even the Stoudites sided with the emperor (see Chapter 13.2). I think therefore that the last resistance of the Thomasians was due to the circumstance that most of them felt like foreigners in Thrace. Many of them were men of fortune, far away from their homes and families, who probably did not find it easy to believe the promises of forgiveness

¹⁰⁴ Th. Cont. II.17 (67.9–68.4).

¹⁰⁵ Gen. II.8 (30.28–29).

¹⁰⁶ Th. Cont. II.18 (68.4–5) has Adrianopolis as the place where Thomas sought refuge, but this is surely an error, for all the other sources have Arkadiopolis; see Signes Codoñer (1995) 272.

¹⁰⁷ Th. Cont. II.19 (68.11–69.12) and Gen. II.8 (30.28–31.51).

¹⁰⁸ Th. Cont. II.19 (70.20–71.3) and Gen. II.8 (31.60–63).

¹⁰⁹ Th. Cont. II.19 (69.5–6) and Gen. II.8 (31.45–46).

¹¹⁰ Th. Cont. II.20 (71.4–14) and Gen. II.9 (31.64–32.80).

¹¹¹ Th. Cont. II.20 (71.6–9).

of the emperor, which were mainly addressed to the Byzantine countrymen who rallied around Thomas' "barbarians". Therefore the unexpected resistance shown by some of Thomas's partisans at the very end of the civil war has probably nothing to do with some kind of commitment to a revolutionary cause, but simply arose out of desperation, as they were outnumbered by the prevailing imperial forces.

However, the dimension of the conflict was not only a quantitative, but also a qualitative, novelty. The number of troops involved, including the fleet, was unprecedented in Byzantine history for a civil war. This is exactly what has moved some modern scholars to connect Thomas's usurpation and the ensuing civil war with some kind of social fractures and conflicts within the empire. Helga Köpstein has defended with a certain success this particular approach to the crisis from a Marxist point of view.¹¹² But the evidence adduced does not support this. Certainly, there were many social and economic conflicts in Byzantium between the classes, the poor and the mighty if we speak in medieval terms. But I doubt whether Thomas could have rallied so many supporters around him for this motive alone. And the evidence of the sources is scanty and ambiguous.

For example, the heavy taxes on the population of Anatolia as well as the fact that their revenue was administered in Constantinople could have played a role in mobilizing the rebels against Michael, as Köpstein rightly argues.¹¹³ But this leads again to regional tension, as Thomas apparently did not take any steps to subvert the prevailing taxation system.¹¹⁴

Nevertheless, we must pay attention to some references made by the Continuator and Genesios to social clashes induced by the war. The Continuator, when describing the civil war, speaks of servants raising murderous hands against their masters, soldiers against their sergeants, and captains against their generals.¹¹⁵ We find in Genesios, who uses the same source as the Continuator, a reference to "slaves who hated their masters"¹¹⁶ among a description of Thomas' supporters that contains mainly allusions to the foreign peoples that were fighting with the usurper. In another passage the Continuator says: "Fathers took up arms against their sons, brothers against those born of the same womb, and finally friends against those who loved them the most."¹¹⁷ Should we consider these references something more than rhetorical commonplaces used by the common source of both authors for describing a civil war?

Wording similar to the last passage of the Continuator appears in the *Life of Ioannikios* by Peter: "For father handed over child to death, and children their fathers, and brothers brothers and friends friends and, simply put, great grief

¹¹² Köpstein (1983).

¹¹³ Köpstein (1983) 77–8.

¹¹⁴ See Lemerle (1965) 294–7, who characterizes the civil war as "un conflit entre l'empire et Constantinople".

¹¹⁵ Th. Cont. I.11 (53.15–17).

¹¹⁶ Gen. II.2 (23.95).

¹¹⁷ Th. Cont. I.9 (49.22–50.3).

possessed the whole land.”¹¹⁸ But in this case, the text refers to the consequences of Leo’s iconoclasm. Thus I would not push too far these lists of disgraces, even if they refer to slaves killing their masters. That many of Thomas’s supporters were mercenaries or soldiers of fortune, poor people who looked for an opportunity to prosper in the war, was surely nothing exceptional and may account for the social upheavals mentioned by Genesios and the Continuator, who probably followed a Constantinopolitan source horrified by the presence of foreigners of lower standing present at the siege of the city.

The references to families split because of the war obviously excludes social causes and points instead to personal convenience as a cause for taking sides with one faction or another. Members of the same family could have made a very different assessment of the situation and reacted in different ways. Thus the *Life of Peter of Atroa* tells us that a consul faithful to Michael saw his son embracing Thomas’s cause.¹¹⁹ But cases like this occurred all the time and the same work also tells us that during the reign of Theophilos a man revealed to the emperor the place where his father-in-law, accused of conspiracy, was hiding.¹²⁰ People could also change sides more than once, as the case of Gregory Pterotos proves. As a cousin of Leo, he should have opposed Thomas when he rebelled against the emperor. However, when Leo was murdered, Gregory was put in prison by Michael on an Aegean island and sided with Thomas, who released him and gave him a command in his army. Again, when the siege of Constantinople started, Pterotos left Thomas’ army and began to negotiate with Michael his going over to him.¹²¹ This changing of sides probably affected only higher officials and the upper classes, who generally consider their own benefit and prosperity, not necessarily for ideological reasons, but according to the circumstances in which they are involved. There is no evidence that peasant or ordinary families were split between their allegiance to Thomas or to Michael.

On balance, we may conclude that the invading army of Thomas won the allegiance of the armies of Anatolia and of a significant part of its population at a very early stage in the conflict. However, this support relied to a great extent on the manpower of its army, recruited from among the peoples of the Caucasus area and reinforced by Muslim troops. This very circumstance probably soon alienated the western part of the Empire from upholding Thomas’s cause: the cities that rallied to Thomas in Thrace were most probably adapting to circumstances, when the initial military successes of Thomas seemed to anticipate a swift victory over Michael.

As no proof of social conflicts has been found, the most logical conclusion is that the civil war dragged on mainly because of the regional tensions between the west and the east of the empire. This tension was certainly not new, but it reached a

¹¹⁸ Peter, *Life of Ioannikios*, 394, in the translation of Sullivan (1986) 274.

¹¹⁹ Sabas, *Life of Peter of Atroa* (1), §36.

¹²⁰ Sabas, *Life of Peter of Atroa* (1), §64. For this episode see Chapter 24.

¹²¹ *PmbZ* #2477 and *PBE* s.v. “Gregorios 71”.

climax at the time, for otherwise the war would not have lasted for so many years, nor would Thomas's partisans have remained faithful to him under such adverse circumstances. However, there is a lack of evidence allowing us to examine more deeply the causes that provoked these regional tensions between the east and west of the Empire. Of course cultural conflict comes first to mind, especially if we consider the significant presence of the Caucasians in Thomas' army (see section 2.3). But there must have been something more, perhaps a reaction against the dominance of the capital itself with its surroundings territories, which were the final destination of the taxes collected in Anatolia. Unfortunately, the sources show us only the surface and not the inside. But icon worship appears to play no role in the conflict, thus proving that to label the period "iconoclast" may prove alien to the real concerns of ordinary people at the time. That the popularity of Theophilus, to be considered in the Epilogue, could survive unchanged the definitive restoration of icon worship in 843 is ample demonstration of this point.

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SECTION II

The Armenian Court

In a prosopographical study written more than twenty years ago, David Turner concluded: “Prosopographical research for the early ninth century can help the historian understand relationships which united what otherwise appear to be diverse figures. It can now be seen that scions of the family of Bardanes the Turk ruled the empire from 813 to 867, making this period more Armenian than Amorion.”¹ He referred then to the fact that the Armenian general Bardanes the Turk, whom we mentioned in Chapter 1.1–2, was not only the uncle of Leo the Armenian, but also father-in-law of both Michael of Amorion and the Armenian general Leo Skleros. There have been since then studies on the Armenian connections of the iconoclast emperors of the ninth century, culminating in the vast and documented work of Christian Settapani.² In his book overwhelming evidence has been brought together concerning Armenians in the Byzantine Empire in the ninth century, making this period truly Armenian, as Turner had already suggested.

The prosopographical reconstruction of the family relationships as proposed by Settapani is not always reliable, for he pushes the evidence too far in trying to connect scattered names in an all-embracing family tree. Nevertheless, a prosopographical approach such as that made by Settapani is needed for understanding the period. We will not enter here into many details, for they have been discussed elsewhere and recollected in Settapani’s book, but it is perhaps advisable to reassess a few points in order to obtain a clearer picture of the period. We will begin by discussing the family links that united Michael of Amorion to Leo the Armenian, as well as the influence of Leo’s partisans in the first part of Michael’s reign (Chapter 3). The marriage of Theophilos to Theodora in 821 will then be analysed against this background (Chapter 4). Thereafter we will pay attention to the role played by Manuel the Armenian, a relative of Theodora whose career began well before the accession of Leo the Armenian to the throne and who, after a long exile, became one of the main supporters of Theophilos (Chapter 5). An assessment of the political significance of the marriage of Michael to Euphrosyne, the daughter of Constantine VI, will follow, in which we will consider whether the Amorion tried to detach himself from the Armenian party at the court (Chapter 6). Finally, the influence of the Armenian members of Theophilos’ family during his reign will be traced (Chapter 7), considering also the opposition of aristocrats or traditionalists to the circle of close supporters of the emperor (Chapter 8).

¹ Turner (1990) 187.

² Settapani (2006).

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Chapter 3

Family Ties: Leo the Armenian and Michael of Amorion

3.1 The Empress Thekla and the Family of Bardanes the Turk

Michael's first wife Thekla was daughter of Bardanes the Turk, one of the leading Armenians of the beginning of the ninth century.¹ His surname was probably due to a Khazar descent through his mother's line.² Through his father's line he could have had Mamikonian origins, as Settipani suggests, but this is conjectural, for the name is quite frequent at the time³ and also appears in other Armenian families.⁴ Anyway, Bardanes could have been descended from a princely family and have rallied around him much support when he claimed the throne in 803.⁵ As Settipani convincingly argues, Leo's father Bardas married the sister of Bardanes the Turk.⁶ This marriage seems to have cemented an alliance between the two families and fostered the career of Leo, who began his military training under Bardanes' command.

Although Bardanes' uprising failed, he obtained the pardon of emperor Nikephoros, who probably did not want to alienate his supporters. This is perhaps the reason why Leo, one of Bardanes' men, was appointed *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi*.⁷ However, after Bardanes had retired to a monastery, he was blinded by some Lykaonians on the secret instructions of Nikephoros, and this event surely infuriated his partisans, among them Leo.

In 808 there was a second attempt against Nikephoros, this time led by the quaestor and patrician Arsaber, again an Armenian. He was probably Leo's father-in-law, as Leo's wife Theodosia was the daughter of an Arsaber.⁸ Was it perhaps the prestige won by Leo under Bardanes that moved Arsaber to marry him to his daughter? In any case, the failure of this second attempt drove Leo into exile, from

¹ For Bardanes see *PmbZ* #766, *PBE* s.v. "Bardanes 3", Turner (1990) and Settipani (2006) 231–6.

² Settipani (2006) 232, note 4.

³ Settipani (2006) 231, note 3 for a list of lead seals of the period with the name Bardanes, whose identification seems problematic. See also *PmbZ* #751–72.

⁴ Settipani (2006) 490.

⁵ For his uprising see Kountoura-Galaki (1983).

⁶ Settipani (2006) 235–6.

⁷ For the significance of this post see Chapter 2.1.

⁸ *Th. Cont.* I.22 (35.7). See *PmbZ* #600 and *PBE* s.v. "Arsaber 1".

which he returned only when Michael I Rhangabe gained power and appointed him strategos of the Anatolikoî, the former position held by Bardanes the Turk.⁹

A parallel case is provided by Leo Skleros, who most probably married a daughter of Bardanes. A “daughter of the Turk”, who played host to Theodore Stoudites in her estate in the Anatolikon during his exile in Leo’s reign, can be identified with a patrician Eirene (also correspondent of the Stoudites), who married an Armenian commander of the Hellas and founded a monastery named *hoi Leontes* (οἱ Λέοντες).¹⁰ Putting all these pieces together, David Turner concludes that Leo Skleros was the husband of Eirene and the son-in-law of Bardanes.¹¹ This Leo Skleros is indeed mentioned by the *Scriptor Incertus* as being appointed strategos of the Peloponnesos by Michael I after he fell into disgrace in the reign of Nikephoros.¹² The marriage between Eirene and Skleros produced two daughters (one named Euphrosyne),¹³ who became nuns along with their mother probably after the father’s death c. 818. All three women are mentioned in the letters of Theodore Stoudites. It thus seems that Leo Skleros also made his career in the shadow of Bardanes the Turk and, after a setback during Nikephoros’ reign, reassumed important positions in the army with Michael I along with Leo the Armenian. The fact that Theodore Stoudites says that Eirene’s husband obtained his commands in Greece and Armenia “out of his imperial/royal connection” (ἐκ βασιλικοῦ κράματος)¹⁴ could point to a relationship with Leo, also a relative of Bardanes, although Skleros began his career well before Leo had imperial power. Is it perhaps an allusion to the Armenian princely blood of the Skleroi?

As a third associate of Bardanes we should also mention here Thomas the Armenian, to be distinguished from Thomas the Slav, as we have already noted and will demonstrate more fully in Chapter 13.1.

The marriage of Michael of Amorion to Thekla, also a daughter of Bardanes, is to be understood against this background. Accordingly, Michael prospered in the army through his connection with Bardanes. As with Leo, he was rewarded with a post after Bardanes’ failure to obtain the throne in 803. Michael was then appointed comes cortis by Nikephoros in order to secure his fidelity.¹⁵ Nothing more is known of him until 811, when the two Leos were called by Michael

⁹ See Turner (1990) 177–80 for this reconstruction of the events. Turner convincingly proved that Leo the Armenian was not strategos of the Armeniakoi under Nikephoros, since Th. Cont. I.4 (11.3–17) falsely attributed to the future emperor facts recorded in the chronicle of Theophanes that actually referred to another Leo. See also Signes Codoñer (1995) 41–5.

¹⁰ *PmbZ* #1446 and *PBE* s.v. “Eirene 17”.

¹¹ Turner (1990) 181–7 and Settapani (2006) 233–4.

¹² *Scrip. Inc.* 336.5–13. The Leo who held a subordinate command in the thema Hellas during Nikephoros’ reign and mentioned in the *Chronicle of Monembasia* 18 can also be identified with Skleros. *PmbZ* #4409 does not mention Turner’s hypothesis.

¹³ *PmbZ* #1707 and *PBE* s.v. “Euphrosyne 4”.

¹⁴ Theod. Stoud., *Letters*, Nr. 458.27.

¹⁵ Th. Cont. I.3 (9.11–12) and I.4 (12.11–12).

Rhangabe back to the capital. Whatever the reason was for Michael Rhangabe to summon these two former associates of Bardanes to Constantinople,¹⁶ they were rewarded with significant posts: Leo the Armenian was appointed strategos of the Anatolikoi and Leo Skleros strategos of the Peloponnesos. Michael did not apparently obtain anything from the new emperor Michael Rhangabe, but if we give credence to the Continuator, he reassumed his old friendship with Leo, who made him his most intimate adviser.¹⁷ Michael served Leo as strator when the latter entered the capital in 813 as newly elected emperor.¹⁸ Of his further career as domestic of the exkoubitores (and tourmarches of the phoideratoi?) during Leo's reign we have already spoken in Chapter 2.1. Here we must just remember that Leo had acted as godfather to Michael's son Theophilos, surely in order to strengthen the ties between the two families.¹⁹ This probably took place before 803, the date of Bardanes' uprising, when both Michael and Leo were under his command, and provides us with an approximate dating for Theophilos' birth.

We must also remember that Michael's promotion by Leo was accompanied by that of Thomas as tourmarches of the phoideratoi, as Leo apparently considered him his closest friend since childhood.²⁰

A common sense of belonging to the same group, labelled as "hetaireia" by Hans-Georg Beck,²¹ accordingly survived among the former members of Bardanes' staff, which apparently only began to disintegrate with Michael's conspiracy in 820.²² It can thus be said that what we have labelled until now as Leo's party was in fact a group constituted during Bardanes' command in Anatolia and made up to a great extent of Armenians. Naturally the group benefited from the accession of Leo to power, but was not dependent only on him and would eventually survive without him. This may explain why the Armenians continued to play an important role even after the murder of Leo, an event we will now consider in some detail.

3.2 Michael's Conspiracy Against Leo

Michael of Amorion was accused twice of conspiracy against Leo the Armenian, if we lend credence to the Continuator and Genesios. The first time he "managed with great pain and effort to clear himself" (μόγῳ πολλῶ καὶ κόπῳ ἀποτρίψασθα

¹⁶ Turner (1990) 180–81 suggests that they were tasked with neutralizing the Lykaonian remnants of Nikephoros' regime "by having them expelled from the city on the pretext of being heretics". Leo the Armenian was in fact charged to bring these Lykaonians back to their Anatolian homeland.

¹⁷ Th. Cont. I.4 (12.10–14).

¹⁸ Th. Cont. I.9 (19.5–7).

¹⁹ Th. Cont. I.12 (23.22–24.1) and Gen. I.11 (9.1–10.1).

²⁰ Th. Cont. I.12 (24.1–2) and Gen. I.11 (9.95–1).

²¹ Beck (1965).

²² Leo Skleros died c. 818, shortly before Thomas' revolt began in 819 (Chapter 2.2).

ἴσχυσεν),²³ but the second time he landed in jail. While he was there, waiting for his execution, Leo was murdered. It was Christmas 820. Some of the conspirators went to the prison where Michael was being held, freed him and put him on the throne. As the story goes, Michael's feet were still in irons.²⁴

Curiously enough, Michael disclaimed any liability for the murder of Leo in the *Letter to Louis*. In it he wrote: “The emperor Leo was killed suddenly by some evildoers who organized a conspiracy against him.”²⁵ He also refers to Thomas as a conspirator and usurper (*tyrannus*) against Leo. Michael may simply have been interested in disentangling himself from the conspirators against Leo, including among them Thomas, who was apparently unpopular in the west (see Chapter 2), and Leo's murderers themselves, who defiled the church where they killed the emperor on Christmas day. However, Michael could have used the occasion to attack Leo in order to justify his own seizure of power. This was quite frequent in Byzantium, at least since Herakleios' propaganda against the “tyrant” Phokas at the beginning of the seventh century.²⁶ More recently, the Isaurians had also been the target of many accusations by their immediate successors to imperial power.²⁷ But Michael does not utter a single word against Leo in the *Letter to Louis*. As a matter of fact, Michael seems to avoid qualifying Leo in any way and refers to him with remarkable neutrality and distance only as “Leo, who held the power before us”, “the already mentioned Leo” or “the emperor Leo, remembered above”.²⁸ Remarkably, nothing is said about Leo as a ruler. This silence seems strange from a person who was accused twice of conspiring against the emperor and had enough motives to criticize him, nor with a comrade of Leo's who was preserving his name against his conspirators. The most likely explanation for this strange detachment is that Michael was in fact continuing Leo's policy but without any sympathy for Leo himself. Dimitry Afinogenov speaks appropriately of Michael as “a disappointed loyalist”.²⁹

This does not mean that Michael was not somehow involved in the murder of Leo. Afinogenov claims that Michael “was probably not implicated in a

²³ Th. Cont. I.21 (34.1), see Gen. I.17 (15.46–47). See Chapter 2.1 for the posts of tourmarches of the phoideratoi and domestic of the exkoubitores that Michael held during Leo's reign.

²⁴ Th. Cont. II.1 (41.7–12) and Gen. II.1 (22. 49–51).

²⁵ *Letter to Louis* 476.29: “a quibusdam inprobis, coniuratione in eum facta, subito occisus est”.

²⁶ For the influence of the official version of Herakleios' rebellion against Phokas in modern historiography see Kaegi (2003) 37–57. For a short overview of the life and work of Herakleios' most important panegyrist, George Pisides, see Howard-Johnston (2010) 16–35.

²⁷ See, for instance, Speck (1990).

²⁸ *Letter to Louis* 476.7, 12–13 and 37–8: “tempore Leonis, qui ante nos hoc imperium tenuit ... ad praedictum Leonem ... memoratus Leo imperator”.

²⁹ Afinogenov (2001) 331.

conspiracy or high treason at the moment of his arrest”,³⁰ but the evidence of the sources speaks clearly otherwise, for Michael was formally accused of usurpation against the emperor according to the Continuator and Genesis.³¹ More probable is the participation of Michael in the actual plot that ended with Leo’s murder. According to the sources, Michael contacted the other conspirators from his cell and threatened them with revealing their names to the emperor if they did not dare to go on with their murderous attempt. It may have been Michael himself who devised the detailed plan for killing Leo at the palace.³² However, this does not mean that the conspiracy was the sole result of his personal ambitions. In fact, there must have been several groups of people opposed to Leo at the end of his reign. Some of them were surely opposed to him from the very beginning as partisans of the deposed Michael Rhangabe and the elites of the capital. The icon worshippers joined them after 814–815, when Leo began his iconoclastic policy. Finally, it may have been a growing disaffection with Leo’s government that caused tensions among the different regions of the empire and favoured the expansion of Thomas’ usurpation in the east since 819.

This last event could have triggered a climate of conspiracy and unrest at the court, which claimed Michael as its first victim. It seems likely that many of the old supporters of Leo began to waver in their fidelity to the emperor as they noticed that there was a real danger of losing power if Leo continued to rule the empire without any concessions. Michael could have been one of the closest advisers of Leo until the very last moment. He was in fact a relative of Leo, as we have seen in section 3.1. Therefore it cannot be simple coincidence that some people who held key posts in the administration while Michael was in prison were not only his supporters, but also remained in charge or at his side after Leo’s murder, as the papias of the palace (a relative of Michael),³³ the patrician Theoktistos (later named Master of the Inkpot and regent for Michael III)³⁴ and John Hexaboulis (perhaps logothete of the dromos).³⁵ Although the story of Leo secretly making a night visit to a sleeping Michael in his cell resembles a folktale in many points,³⁶ the detail of the emperor keeping for himself the key of Michael’s irons because he did not trust anybody³⁷ reflects appropriately the increasing isolation of the ruler. The frequent allusions in the sources to harshness and brutality on Leo’s part may

³⁰ Afinogenov (2001) 338.

³¹ Th. Cont. II.21 (34.20): τυραννίδος ἐπίθεσιν μελετῶν; Gen. I.17 (16.75): ἐλέγχεται τυραννίδα.

³² This active role of Michael in the design of the plan appears in Gen. I.19 (18.40–44), but not in Th. Cont. I.25 (38.11–15).

³³ Th. Cont. I.21 (35.13–14), II.24 (37.16–17, 38.1–2), Gen. I.18, 19 (17.12, 17–20) and Log. (A), *Leon V* [128] 11 (213.65).

³⁴ Th. Cont. II.25 (38.8–9) and Gen. I.19 (17.35–18.38). See *PmbZ* #8050 and *PBE* s.v. “Theoktistos 3”.

³⁵ Gen. I.1 (22.54–55). See Signes Codoñer (1995) 75.

³⁶ Signes Codoñer (1995) 164.

³⁷ Th. Cont. I.21 (35.14–15) and Gen. I.18 (17.14–15).

perhaps represent, as already argued (see Chapter 1.2), a turn in the later phase of his reign, as the emperor, lacking support, resorted to repression in order to impose his authority.

It seems therefore conceivable that Leo's supporters found it advisable to reinvent themselves in order to survive and preserve their power. Thus they decided to change the leader (Leo), who hindered compromise with other parties. This may explain, for example, the loosening of the iconoclasm that immediately followed Michael's ascension to the throne: it was not caused by Michael's personal religious beliefs, but by the necessity of rallying allies against Thomas.

Michael wanted to show that his election represented a widening of horizons and accordingly described his election after Leo's murder in the *Letter to Louis* not only as the choice of God and the Virgin, but also as "consensus omnium". The patriarch, the patricians, senators and noblemen, assembling at the city following the ancient tradition ("secundum antiquum morem"), elected him emperor to overcome the divisions of the Christians caused by Thomas' usurpation.³⁸

But how could he conceal the fact that he had conspired against Leo and directly contributed to his end? Surely, the fact that it was Thomas who openly raised arms against Leo made this concealment a bit easier. On the other hand, many people were implicated in the conspiracy, as the sources clearly show, so that Michael could effectively dissociate himself from the actual murders, as he was in prison at the time. Nevertheless, as Afinogenov suggests, "the only chance for Michael to make his propaganda even potentially credible was to do something about at least the immediate perpetrators of the assassination".³⁹ Did he in fact punish them?

3.3 The Execution of Leo's Murderers

Michael's son, Theophilos, is credited with having punished the murderers of Leo in the first assembly called after his father's death and his appointment as only emperor. This event, described at some length in the chronicles,⁴⁰ fits well with the image of justice favoured by Theophilos that we will consider in the Epilogue to this book. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the story must have been invented. It appears, however, that Theophilos only punished the actual murderers of Leo, not the conspirators behind them. This is apparently confirmed by the chronicles, since they make the emperor say that he punishes those stained with human blood and killing in the temple of God. Moreover, Theoktistos, who played a leading role in the conspiracy against Leo, continued to be a key figure in the reign of Theophilos and was even regent of his heir Michael III after 842.

³⁸ *Letter to Louis* 476.29–477.2.

³⁹ Afinogenov (2001) 332.

⁴⁰ Th. Cont. III.1 (84.16–86.8), Gen. III.1 (36.82–93) and Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 6 (217.22–218.36). See also Signes Codoñer (1995) 360–61.

Unfortunately, the names of the actual murderers of Leo supposedly executed by Theophilus are not given in the chronicles. In fact, our sources only single out one of the murderers attacking Leo in the church describing an anonymous giant, a member of the family of the Krambonitai (ἐκ τῶν Κραμβωνιτῶν γενεᾶς), as the man who struck the blows that caused Leo's death.⁴¹ This family name is otherwise unattested, but as *krambion* (κραμβίον) means cabbage,⁴² it is not implausible to understand the name as "greengrocer", although this does not necessarily point to the humble position of the man but at most to the humble origins of his lineage some generations earlier. Genesios says that the killer had the nickname "the One-and-a-half" (τὸ ἓν καὶ ἥμισυ) because of his huge stature, surely a reason for hiring his services.⁴³ Skylitzes, for his part, qualifies the man as noble (γεννάδας), although this could be an inference based on the status of the family at his time.⁴⁴ But be that as it may, could Michael in fact have left these killers unpunished?

Afinogenov lends some credence to a passage in the *Life of Euthymios*, where the author, the future patriarch Methodios, says that

... the beast [Leo V] was slain by his enemy and avenger [Michael II], for it is right to call thus his successor in full accord with the scriptures, as he, having been hostile even to death, attempted to avenge him against his fellow murderers, as well as in regard to his doctrine.⁴⁵

According to Afinogenov, the only possible meaning of the passage is that Michael II punished the murderers of Leo. However, the text is perhaps not to be taken literally, for Methodios seems to play with the phrase "enemy and avenger" (παρὰ τοῦ ἐχθροῦ καὶ ἐκδικητοῦ) taken from Psalm 8.3, where God is made "to destroy the enemy and the avenger" (τοῦ καταλύσαι ἐχθρὸν καὶ ἐκδικητήν), so that both terms seem to be negative. Most important, the text says only that Michael "attempts in turn" (πάλιν πειρᾶται) to avenge Leo in the person of his fellow murders. It is therefore not explicitly said that he *succeeded* in his purpose and punished Leo's murderers. This is by no means strange, for he owed the throne to them. Despite the family connections between Michael and Leo mentioned above, he might have felt unable to punish the killers of his predecessor, a task his

⁴¹ Th. Cont. I.25 (39.20).

⁴² *LbGr* s.vv. κραμβίν, κραμβιτᾶς.

⁴³ Gen. I.20 (19.73–75).

⁴⁴ Skyl., *Leon V*, 11 (28.51). For later members of this family see Winkelmann (1987) 78, 160 and Flusin and Cheynet (2003) 23, note 27.

⁴⁵ Methodios, *Life of Euthymios* 10 (199–201): σφάζεται ὁ θῆρ παρὰ τοῦ ἐχθροῦ καὶ ἐκδικητοῦ αὐτοῦ· οὕτω γὰρ καλεῖν τὸν τούτου διάδοχον γραφικώτατα δίκαιον, καθότι ἐχθράνας εἰς θάνατον διεκδικεῖν αὐτὸν πάλιν πειρᾶται ἐπὶ τε τοὺς συνανδροφόρους καὶ τὸ δόγμα αὐτοῦ.

son Theophilos felt freer to accomplish.⁴⁶ The fact that Theophilos succeeded in summoning Michael's fellow conspirers to a public meeting with the excuse that he wanted to fulfil his father's will to "reward" them, although looking like a literary device (literary narrative likes ambiguities and unexpected turns in the stories!), points to some kind of unpaid debt or unfulfilled task by Michael.

There is however an Arabic account of the tenth century, the so-called *Book of the recompense* of the Egyptian scribe Ibn al-Dāya (d. ca. 945–951), that attributes to Michael the punishment of Leo's murderers. The story told by this source is quite similar to the one preserved in the Greek sources for Theophilos.⁴⁷ Michael, after being put on the throne by the conspirators who murdered Leo, meets all of them in the imperial audience-chamber and asks them to inform him of all their needs. Otherwise, he will not taste the food that was set up for them. The text continues:

Then each of them mentioned that which he hoped King Michael would grant him. And Michael granted all their requests. Then they asked him to eat, and he said: "We have disposed of that which was due to you. There remains which is due to God and to king Leo. It would not befit me to eat before I do what is due to them both". Then he said to the patriarch. "What is the punishment of one who deprives his king of the drawing of breath and the spirit of life?" The patriarch answered: "He shall be deprived of breath and the spirit of life." Then Michael said to them: "The patriarch has decreed for you that which may not be contradicted." He ordered their decapitation and began to eat.

The parallels with the Greek version of the punishment by Theophilos are striking. The short dialogue with the patriarch is very similar to the one Theophilos has with the senate in the version of the chronicle of the Logothete. There, Theophilos asks those present: "What punishment does the man deserve who entered in the temple of God and murdered His anointed?" The answer is: "He deserves death, my Lord."⁴⁸ Beheading of the conspirers is also ordered forthwith. However, Ibn al-Dāya says that he heard the story from his father, who in turn heard another man of the Khurāsān refer to it on the authority of the caliph Maḥdī. That this oral transmission distorted the "original" story is proved by the indication of the text that a woman (probably meaning Theodora, Theophilos' widow) ruled after Michael. I think it therefore likely that the original anecdote, as is often the case with storytellers, was conveniently simplified for an Arabic audience, the dispensable role of Theophilos as late avenger of Leo being suppressed and given

⁴⁶ There is accordingly no need to consider "the execution of Leo's murderers by Theophilos just another fanciful piece of literature", as stated by Afinogenov (2001) 333.

⁴⁷ See the English translation in Lewis (1939). Afinogenov does not seem to know this text.

⁴⁸ Log. (A), *Theophilos* [130] 6.

to Michael.⁴⁹ The dramatic effect of the immediate “reward” of Leo’s murderers was thus heightened.

Nevertheless, the possibility is always there that Michael effectively punished some of the conspirators and even leading figures among them, but could not proceed further against others, whose support he needed for remaining in power. In that case, however, one would have expected that Michael punished the perpetrators of the murder, whereas Theophilos would have extended the punishment to the masterminds behind it (but not to all of them, as Theoktistos continued in charge). This appears to contradict the statement of the Byzantine chronicles that Theophilos punished those stained with blood, but only if we take this indication literally. In fact, the people Theophilos executed are given some relevance by the chronicles. The Continuator says that they were even rewarded “with many honours and other bounties and prizes” by Michael,⁵⁰ and this seems to exclude mere hired killers and imply the leaders of the conspiracy. If this interpretation holds true, then Theophilos could have considered that they, although not the direct perpetrators of the crime, were somehow also stained with the sacrilegious murder of Leo.

It could be that Michael moved from the beginning between the indispensable support of some conspirators and the need to foster continuity and display legitimacy. It is also likely that there were many tendencies among the conspirators against Leo and that not all of them were former comrades and supporters of Leo’s policy, as Michael was. Michael undoubtedly was obliged to manoeuvre between parties with different interests in the difficult climate of Thomas’ invasion and most probably was prevented from following his own policy. The fact that Thomas was not the only opposition he met is demonstrated by the existence of sources, not necessarily iconophile, very critical of Michael, from which we have the details of the conspiracy.

We must nonetheless take into account that Michael did indeed persecute some direct relatives of the murdered emperor. This was certainly the case for Leo’s wife and their common (three or four) children (including Constantine-Symbatios, co-emperor with his father), who were banished to the island of Prote. This move was understandable, since all of them were a potential danger for Michael while they remained at liberty.⁵¹ Gregory Pterotos, a nephew of Leo’s, was also banished to an Aegean island, from where he later joined Thomas’ cause.⁵² It seems that Michael retained Pterotos’ wife and children in Constantinople only after Pterotos attacked the capital with Thomas.⁵³ Nevertheless, these actions did not go beyond the logical preventive measures against potential dissidents and do not necessarily

⁴⁹ For errors in the chronology of Theophilos’ reign in oriental sources see Chapter 5.5 in connection with the dating of Manuel’s exile.

⁵⁰ Th. Cont. III.1 (85.15–17).

⁵¹ Th. Cont. II.1 (41.1–7) and Gen. IV.18 (70.90–71.71.3)

⁵² *PmbZ* #2477 and *PBE* s.v. “Gregorios 71”.

⁵³ Th. Cont. II.16 (63.6–8).

contradict the continuity Michael tried to foster officially after he seized power. In fact, family links with Leo's Armenian family did not disappear after Leo's death, as we shall see when we turn to the marriage of Theophilos to the Armenian Theodora.

Chapter 4

Parties at the Court: The Armenian Marriage of Theophilus

4.1 Dating the Marriage

The marriage of Theophilus and Theodora, with far-reaching consequences, must have taken place when Thekla was still Michael's wife and the Amorians had not yet repudiated her in order to marry Euphrosyne, the daughter of Constantine VI.¹ We know that Michael took the bold step of marrying Euphrosyne probably ca. 824, as the civil war with Thomas was already over and he was a widower. We will consider shortly his motivations for this act. For the moment it suffices to underline the fact that the Armenian Thekla must have stood behind Theophilus' marriage. The first evidence is provided by the name given by Theophilus to his daughter Thekla, perhaps the eldest of all his children² as Euphrosyne was not yet Theophilus' stepmother.

However, some sources mention Euphrosyne as the person who prepared the bride-show for Theophilus that resulted in his marriage with Theodora. We leave for the moment the question of the historicity of this bride-show, which has been object of many studies.³ What matters now is the supposed role Euphrosyne assumed in it. I think that the later chroniclers mentioned Euphrosyne instead of Thekla as the organizer of the bride-show because they had in most cases no knowledge of the existence of the first wife, Thekla, and linked to the more famous Euphrosyne every mention of a wife of Michael they found in their sources. This came even to the point of qualifying Euphrosyne as Theophilus' actual mother, for instance in the chronicle of the Logothete or in the *Life of Theodora*, although Euphrosyne bore Michael no children.⁴

But when exactly did Theophilus get married? We know that Theophilus was crowned co-emperor on 12 May 821, only months after Michael ascended the throne. The possibility that the marriage took place on the same day has

¹ See *PmbZ* #1705 and *PBE* s.v. "Euphrosyne 1".

² See Chapter 7.2 for the problem concerning Maria, the supposed youngest of Theophilus' daughters.

³ See, among others, Brooks (1901), Rydén (1985), Hans (1988), Afinogenov (1997), Vinson (1999) and Treadgold (1975), (1979a), (2004), for references to the sources.

⁴ Log. (A) *Theophilus* [130] 2 (216.2): ἡ δὲ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ Εὐφροσύνη; *Life of Theodora* 3 (260.47): τῆς βασιλίσσης Εὐφροσύνης, τῆς μητρὸς τοῦ βασιλέως.

been suggested and is plausible.⁵ This could have caused the confusion of later writers, who read in their sources that Theophilos was married the same day of his crowning as emperor and therefore dated the marriage to 829, the first year of Theophilos' sole reign. Moreover, they had Euphrosyne organizing the bride-show, for they knew that she acted at the time as mother of the emperor.⁶ But in fact at that time the adult Theophilos did not need any mother to arrange his wedding. The association of Kassia with the bride-show speaks also for an early dating of the marriage, for Kassia was probably born at the very beginning of the ninth century, c. 800–805.⁷

There were also reasons for Michael not to delay the marriage of his only son and heir. Michael was in the first years of his reign in a very precarious situation, as Thomas was preparing the assault against Constantinople and Michael's bloody seizure of power cast shadows on his legitimacy. It was important for him to give some satisfaction to the Armenian supporters of his inner group, the former *hetaireia* of Bardanes, with an "Armenian" wedding. The stability and continuity of his dynasty would thus be emphasized from the very beginning.

4.2 Theodora's Family

Theodora was the candidate elected for the young prince Theophilos. Her family came from Ebissa in Paphlagonia,⁸ but most probably had Armenian origins. Her parents, the *droungarios* Marinus⁹ and Theoktiste Florina, bore Greek and Latin names, but this circumstance does not exclude an Armenian origin, as Armenians residing in the Byzantine Empire for many years frequently gave their children alternatively Armenian and Greek names.¹⁰ Marinus was also the name of Herakleios' brother and of his son by his second wife Martina, a circumstance

⁵ This idea was advanced by Brooks (1901) and has recently been supported by *PmbZ* #8167, esp. 629 and Settiani (2006) 159–66.

⁶ The mention of Euphrosyne was one of the most solid arguments for Treadgold (1975) to date the marriage to 829, immediately after Michael II's death. I supported his view in Signes Codoñer (1995) 263–5, albeit with some minor objections. Afinoǵenov (1997) 10, note 2, also follows Treadgold against Brooks (1901).

⁷ However, the biography of Kassia is not unproblematic. Her identification with a namesake novice addressed by Theod. Stoud., *Letters* nr. 217, 370 and 539 as early as 816–818 (according to Fatouros' dating) would eventually make it impossible for her to be selected as a bride for Theophilos in 821, unless we discard the bride-show arranged for Theophilos as a literary fiction. For details see *PmbZ* #3636 and 3637 and *PBE* s.vv. "Kassia 1 and 2". The most comprehensive study about Kassia remains that of Rochow (1967).

⁸ Th. Cont. III.5 (89.15–19).

⁹ Settiani (2006) 167 suggests that the name of Theodora's father could have been Marianos, since his grandchild, son of his son Petronas, was named Marianos.

¹⁰ Settiani (2006) 50, note 3.

that perhaps points to its popularity among Armenians.¹¹ More revealing is the name Bardas as the most important of Theodora's brothers, the future kaisar of Michael III and especially, the Armenian origin of Manuel, Theodora's uncle (see Chapter 5.1).

The family of the future empress must have been of some means, for otherwise she would not have married the emperor. In fact, an anecdote preserved by the Continuator informs us that the empress was a rich shipowner who traded in cargoes of corn.¹² In the story the emperor is said to have been infuriated when he discovered his wife's commercial activity and had her ship burned. However, Theodora's fortune could not have escaped Theophilos' notice at the time of the marriage, so that the burning of the ship, if authentic, probably happened for reasons unknown to us.¹³ It is a possibility that Theodora's ship carried corn from Paphlagonia,¹⁴ which at the time was one of the main suppliers of the *annona* to Constantinople.¹⁵ The naval connections of Theodora's family may also explain why Sergios Niketiates, presented in the synaxarion as a relative of Theodora and Michael III, was later sent after Theophilos' death to Crete as the commander of the naval contingents.¹⁶ The Paphlagonian commander Petronas Kamateros could also have been intended as ambassador to Cherson and the Khazars because of his connections with Theodora's family.¹⁷ There are thus some reasons to suppose that Theodora's fortune played some role in her marriage to Theophilos.¹⁸

Perhaps Manuel, who was already protostrator during the reign of Michael I, was the mastermind behind the marriage between his niece and the emperor's son.¹⁹ He is never mentioned in this respect, for in the sources the marriage of Theophilos is presented as a bride-show for the young prince and any reference to the political background is avoided. We also do not know exactly what role Manuel played during Michael II's reign and the real interest the emperor had in linking his family with that of Manuel. But there is a strong possibility that

¹¹ Herakleios was most probably an Armenian according to Kaegi (2003) 21–4 and popular among the Armenians in later times; see however Settapani (2006) 115–17 against the Armenian origins of the emperor. On the other hand, Latin names among Romanized Armenians were very usual and, in fact, Florina was the cognomen of Theoktista, this being an evidence of patrician origins.

¹² Th. Cont. III.4 (88.10–89.14). The text of the Continuator speaks only of σίτου (corn) as the cargo of the ship. It is Skylitzes who adds a reference to οἴνου (wine), which the editors have included *silente* in the text of the Continuator.

¹³ See the Epilogue for a short commentary on the episode.

¹⁴ Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 517 mistakenly say that Theodora's ship sailed with goods from Syria.

¹⁵ Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 507, 520–21, 577–8.

¹⁶ *Synaxarium Const.* 777–8.

¹⁷ See Chapters 7.1 and 19.1.

¹⁸ Magdalino (1998b) considers the later ascendancy of the Paphlagonians at the imperial court as having originated perhaps in Theodora's time.

¹⁹ Lilie (1999b) 174.

Michael wanted to seek support for his dynasty in influential Armenian circles and hence Manuel's niece would have been an attractive option for him. The late exile of Manuel could accordingly be linked with Michael's changing of sides after the civil war (see Chapter 5).

John the Grammarian could also have promoted Theodora's marriage to Theophilos. Several sources say that Theodora deposed him as patriarch in 843 despite him being her *synteknos* (σύντεκνος ἀπῆς).²⁰ The expression means that the Grammarian was godfather of at least one of Theodora's children.²¹ We do not know which one of them, and therefore whether this spiritual link between Theodora and John was established before or after the latter's nomination as patriarch,²² for the last of Theophilos' children, Michael, was born as late as 840.²³ However, it is interesting to note that Manuel too acted as godfather to some of Theophilos' children when he returned from exile at the beginning of his reign.²⁴ If Manuel's kinship with Theodora was the reason for him acting as godfather, it could also be that the Grammarian was chosen as godfather to her children for that reason and not because of his position as patriarch (which would be understandable if the baptized child were the heir to the throne).²⁵

In fact, there is a strong possibility that the Arsaber who married one of Theodora's sisters, named Kalomaria, was John's brother. The Continuator says that the Arsaber who married Maria was "at the time a patrician and later even a magistros" (τῷ τηνικαῦτα μὲν πατρικίῳ ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ μαγίστρῳ).²⁶ The same author tells us in a previous passage of the same book that John had a brother named Arsaber, "who had been honoured by Theophilos with the dignity of a patrician" (τὴν τύχην πατρικίως παρὰ Θεοφίλου τιμηθεῖς).²⁷ Although the Armenian name Arsaber (Arshavir) was not infrequent at the time, it seems likely that these two Arsabers were the same man.²⁸ Thus the appointment of Arsaber as patrician by Theophilos would be a consequence of his marriage to the emperor's sister-in-law. We must, however, suppose that the marriage took place after Theodora's

²⁰ See Log. (A), *Michael III* [131] 1 (232.8) and Pseudo-Symeon 647.10. *PmbZ* #3199 mentions that John was σύντεκνος of Theodora (sources in note 23).

²¹ The word σύντεκνος expresses the spiritual kinship between the godfather and the father or mother (referred to in genitive) of the baptized child. See Macrides (1987) 143.

²² For the date of John's appointment as patriarch see Chapters 19.1, 21.3 (note 58) and 24.1.

²³ Mango (1967).

²⁴ Th. Cont. III.26 (120.23): σύντεκνος ἔκτοτε χρηματίζει αὐτοῦ. The same wording in Skyl., *Theophilos* 19 (71.40). Log. (A), *Theophilos* [130] 22 (223.155–156) is more precise: τοὺς αὐτοῦ παῖδας ἐκ τοῦ ἁγίου βαπτίσματος ἀνεδέξατο.

²⁵ However, in this case we should have perhaps expected a mention of that fact in the Byzantine chronicles.

²⁶ Th. Cont. IV.22 (175.3–4).

²⁷ Th. Cont. IV.8 (156.16–17).

²⁸ Settipani (2006) 340.

marriage and accordingly during Michael II's reign.²⁹ Theophilos would have acted as co-emperor when he rewarded his brother-in-law with the title of patrician. His appointment as magistros came perhaps later on.

At the same time Sophia, another of Theodora's sisters, married Constantine Baboutzikos, member of a further Armenian (or at least Caucasian) family that appears several times during the period.³⁰ Unfortunately, we have no further information about this Constantine and cannot therefore ascertain the motives behind this engagement.

In any case, can the marriage of Arsaber be considered a part of the deal that linked Theodora's family with the future heir of the imperial throne? If so, we must suppose that John played some role in arranging the wedding and that he had accordingly some influence over Michael of Amorion. Probably Michael had become acquainted with John during Leo's reign, when the Grammarian came into prominence as one of the advisers of Leo the Armenian in the reopened struggle on icon worship. In fact, although John is not mentioned as having played any role in Michael's reign, the Continuator tells us that the strong admiration Michael felt for his knowledge resulted in his appointment as teacher and mentor of his son Theophilos.³¹ If Theophilos married in 821, John would already have been appointed his mentor in Leo's reign. He surely continued to influence the young co-emperor after 821, as his later appointment as patriarch by Theophilos clearly shows. But, more importantly, from his position as Theophilos' mentor he could have convinced Michael to choose Theodora as a convenient bride for his son, considering her kinship with Manuel.

The marriage of John's brother Arsaber to one of Theodora's sisters would thus have been planned to reinforce the relationship between the two families and symbolized somehow John's connections with the imperial family. That John and Manuel later became godfathers to the children of the imperial couple further reinforced these links. It was perhaps not a coincidence that John was later sent on an embassy to Baghdad to recall Manuel from exile, as both men were relatives (see Chapter 5.4). Considering the slanderous campaign pursued by iconophile sources against John after 843, it comes as no surprise that the connection of the "perverse" intellectual leader of iconoclasm with the orthodox and pious empress Theodora was utterly silenced, except by a passing remark about his being godfather to Theodora's child (or children). It could even be thought that the depiction of Theophilos' marriage as a colourful bride-show was conceived to hide John's role in this event.

²⁹ For the same idea see Treadgold (1988) note 374.

³⁰ Charanis (1961) 208, Winkelmann (1987) 163–4, *PMbZ* #3932, *PBE* s.v. "Konstantinos 30", and Settapani (2006) 172, note 4.

³¹ Th. Cont. IV.7 (154.21–155.1): διαφερόντως παρὰ Μιχαὴλ ἡγάπητο (i.e. Ἰωάννης) τοῦ Τραυλοῦ, εἴτε μόνῳ τούτῳ τῷ κοινωνὸς εἶναι τῆς τούτου αἰρέσεως, εἴτε καὶ τῷ διαφέρειν ἐπὶ λογίῳτινι δόξαν τινὰ ἐσχηκῶς. πλὴν ἡγάπητο καὶ τοῦ Θεοφιλοῦ διδάσκαλος ἐγκαθίστατο.

4.3 John the Grammarian: Relatives and Influence

We do not know how many persons could have gained influence during Michael II's reign through John's agency, for the promotion of his relatives such as Leo the Philosopher³² or even Photios³³ is to be dated to the reign of Theophilos. But perhaps the appointment of Antonios Kassymatas as new patriarch by Michael, on the eve of the marriage of Theophilos with Theodora in 821, could have been due to John.

The patriarch Theodotos Kassiteras, a strong supporter of Leo's iconoclasm, died shortly after Michael's accession. He was a member of the Melissenoi, a family of Armenian origin from Melitene on the Euphrates border and outside the empire.³⁴ The family continued to have a role in Theophilos' reign, as one of its members was general during the siege of Amorion.³⁵ Kassiteras' substitution was certainly a difficult task for Michael, for Thomas was then marching against Constantinople and the emperor needed the support of its population to face the rebel's threat. The situation for Michael was similar to the beginning of Leo's reign, when the Bulgarians besieged the capital. It is significant that the election fell on Antonios Kassymatas, who was the leader of the commission summoned by Leo to re-establish iconoclasm and perhaps even the protopapas of the palace clergy, in any case not a layman such as Kassiteras, but an ecclesiastic with his own career.³⁶

We do not know anything about the ethnic origins or family relations of Antonios Kassymatas, only that he was the leader of the iconoclasts during Leo's reign. His appointment by Michael could only be understood as a concession to

³² Leo the Philosopher, who is referred to as a nephew or cousin of the Grammarian by the Continuator, was born c. 790, some ten years later than John; see Th. Cont. IV.26 (185.11): *κατὰ συγγένειαν τοῦ ἐξαδέλφου*; Skyl. *Michael III*, 15 (101.81): *ἀνεψιός*. PmbZ #4440 and Settapani (2006) 169 think that Leo was nephew of John.

³³ Th. Cont. IV.22 (175.3–11) makes Arsaber not only the husband of Theodora's sister (Kalo)Maria, but also the brother of Photios' mother Eirene. Skyl., *Michael III*, 11 (98.73–77), completely alters the passage and makes Photios the brother of Sergios, who supposedly married another of Theodora's sisters, named Eirene. Be this as it may, it is clear that Photios was related to the family of Theodora. If Arsaber was in fact John's brother, this means that some kind of relationship between Photios and the Grammarian existed, albeit completely silenced by the sources. The reasons for this silence are unclear, for there were many enemies of Photios who could have had an interest in revealing this relationship. For these questions see Bury (1890), Ahrweiler (1965), Mango (1977), Settapani (2006) 169–72 and 340–42, and Varona Codeso (2009a) 343–8 and (2009b) 125–8.

³⁴ Settapani (2006) 77 and 492–505 for the genealogy of the Melissenoi. The estates the family owned in Phrygia are probably linked to the *strategia* Michael Melissenos held in the theme of the Anatolikai between 766 and 772 and have nothing to do with his origins; see Pratsch (1999b) 149–50.

³⁵ Winkelmann (1987) 152–3.

³⁶ See Pratsch (1999c).

Leo's followers, perhaps even a sign of the weakness of the new emperor, who had only just come into power when Kassiteras died.

It is revealing that some sources present Kassymatas as closely bound to the Grammarian as the two most prominent heads of iconoclasm. They are collectively named "Iannes and Iambres", the magicians who, according to St. Paul (2 Timothy 3.8), opposed Moses before the Pharaoh.³⁷ The *Scriptor Incertus* even says that it was John and his other associates who brought Kassymatas, then bishop of Sylaion, to the palace and commended him to the emperor.³⁸ Could John again have suggested to Michael the Amorion the appointment of Kassymatas for the patriarchal throne? If the question were answered in the positive, we would have additional evidence for the influence John exerted over Michael at the beginning of his reign. This influence meant the continuity of Leo's heritage, as it was based on personal relationships already established during his reign. It is therefore not a coincidence that many of the protagonists were of Armenian origin, like Michael's wife Thekla (related to Bardanes the Turk and Leo the Armenian), Manuel the Armenian and his niece Theodora (married to Theophilos) or the Melissenoi and Baboutzikoi. John the Grammarian was not an exception.

The Continuator states that John was "neither a newcomer nor a foreigner, but indigenous and a scion of this imperial city", and adds that he descended "not from an obscure lineage but from a very noble one, named the Morocharzanioi (Μοροχαρζανίων)".³⁹ The family could have been noble and of ancient origin at the time but as the name remains unattested in other sources before the end of the eleventh century,⁴⁰ we cannot check this point. The name is, moreover, difficult to interpret and no origin of the family can be ascertained from it.⁴¹

Pseudo-Symeon, who copies this piece of information from the Continuator,⁴² tells another story about the Grammarian, making him the son of the *skiastes* (σκιαστής) Pankratiος.⁴³ This indication seems to have been copied literally from the

³⁷ Pratsch (1999c) 160, note 16 and Lilie (1999b) 178–80.

³⁸ *Scrip. Inc.* 351.10–13: τοῦτον καταμηνύσαντες πρὸς Λέοντα τὸν βασιλέα ὃ τε Ἰωάννης ὁ ἐπικλῆν Ἰλλιᾶς, ὃν ἐκάλουν γραμματικόν, καὶ οἱ σὺν αὐτῷ, ὄντα τῷ τηνικαῦτα ἐν τῷ Συλαίῳ, πέμψας ἤγαγεν αὐτὸν.

³⁹ Th. Cont. IV.6 (154.13–17): οὐκ ἐπιγλότης καὶ ξένος, αὐτόχθων δὲ καὶ τῆς βασιλίδος ταύτης τῶν πόλεων βλάστημα [...] οὐδ' ἐξ ἀσημοῦ τινὸς ἀλλὰ καὶ λίαν εὐγενοῦς καταγόμενος σειρᾶς, τῆς οὕτω τῶν Μοροχαρζανίων (eds. Μοροχαρζανίων) λεγομένης. See also Skyl., *Michael II*, 4 (84.92–93).

⁴⁰ Winkelmann (1987) 210.

⁴¹ See *PmbZ* #1067 s.v. "Charzanites". Charzanas *ibid.* #22.256, 22.737 and 24.252, Charzanites, *ibid.* #21.235 and Charzianites, *ibid.* #21.236 appear in the tenth and eleventh centuries as family names, but they do not provide any evidence about the origin of the denomination.

⁴² The family named is spelled as Μοροχαρδανίων (in Par. gr. 1712, the eds have Μωροκαρδανίων) in Pseudo-Symeon 649, but the form of the Continuator is to be preferred, as the narrative of Pseudo-Symeon is clearly dependent on him at this point.

⁴³ Pseudo-Symeon 606.

so-called *Scriptor Incertus*.⁴⁴ There it is also said that Leo the Armenian promised the patriarchate to John if he aided him in successfully destroying the icons,⁴⁵ but that the bishops finally elected Theodotos Kassiteras, who was a member “of noble and illustrious families” (εὐγενεῖς καὶ ἐμφανεῖς), while John was “young and obscure” (νέος ... καὶ ἀφανής).⁴⁶ This indication stresses both John’s youth and lack of prominence as the causes of his relegation as an acceptable candidate for the patriarchal throne in favour of the illustrious family of the Melissenoi, to which the older Theodotos Kassiteras belonged. However, the ambiguous term ἀφανής (“obscure”) applied to John could be intended as a pejorative in a staunchly iconophile author such as the *Scriptor Incertus* and does not necessarily prove that John’s family was obscure at the time, but perhaps that it had been raised to prominence only recently.⁴⁷ A version of the *Letter of Theophilos* certainly qualifies John as “one of the nondescript penniless vagabonds of the city” (τις τῶν εὐτελῶν καὶ ἀφανῶν ἀγρυπτοῶν τῆς πόλεως), but this occurs in an alternative ending preserved only in a fifteenth-century manuscript and was probably added to the text at a very late stage.⁴⁸ It seems in any case that some authors intended to slander John by asserting his humble origins against a supposed noble descent. We are completely unaware of the motives behind this slander, but it is perhaps not enough to refute the precise indications of the Continuator.

It is accordingly possible that John’s family had gained a certain reputation as early as in Leo’s days and that the term σκιαστής (“the person who casts a shadow”) of his father Pankratios has nothing to do with a possible subordinate office, but it is perhaps used as an insulting term to disqualify him. If the father was the homonymous court astrologer of emperor Constantine VI who, according to Theophanes, died in 792 in the battle of Markellai against the Bulgarians,⁴⁹ we could perhaps understand the term σκιαστής as a scornful word for “magician”. Astrologers, especially for iconophiles, were always viewed with suspicion.⁵⁰

However, whereas the family could have gained a certain prominence only with the Isaurians, it was not ultimately of Constantinopolitan origin, as the Armenian names of John’s father, corresponding to Armenian Bagrat,⁵¹ and John’s brother, Arsaber,⁵² clearly show. This links the family with the Armenian Bagratids,⁵³ although it can be doubted whether any royal or noble descent was implied,

⁴⁴ *Scrip. Inc.* 349.19–350.2.

⁴⁵ *Scrip. Inc.* 350.2–6.

⁴⁶ *Scrip. Inc.* 359.16–360.2

⁴⁷ Pace Settapani (2006)

⁴⁸ *Letter to Theophilos, Alternative Ending 2*, chapter 36 (111.17).

⁴⁹ Theoph. 468.4–6. See *PmbZ* #5680 and 5682 and *PBE* s.vv. “Pankratios 1 and 2”.

⁵⁰ This idea was advanced by Browning (1965) 402–3. For Pankratios and John the Grammarian see Magdalino (2006) 55–6 and 63.

⁵¹ *PmbZ* #5680 and 5682.

⁵² *PmbZ* #601 and 602 and *PBE* s.vv. “Arsaber 5 and 6”.

⁵³ Settapani (2006) 339–42.

especially if we consider the family's lack of prominence alluded to in the Greek sources when contrasted with the Armenian Melissenoi.

We can conclude that the "Armenian party" led by John the Grammarian and Antonios Kassymatas could have had the upper hand at the court at the very beginning of Michael's reign, when the new emperor was facing the rebellion of Thomas and perhaps felt insecure and isolated. We do not know, however, whether this group was behind the conspiracy against Leo or on the contrary exerted pressure for the punishment of Leo's murderers. Perhaps the usurpation of Thomas the Slav after 819 cancelled for a while the differences between different Armenian factions in the capital. But things could have been otherwise in Anatolia. We would certainly wish to know more details about Michael's appointments in the Anatolian themes before Thomas' invasion and which of the local strategoi took sides with the rebel and for what reasons. As this evidence is lacking, the figure of Manuel the Armenian comes perhaps to our aid as he held an important post as strategos in Anatolia immediately before Michael ascended the throne. Let us now consider the evidence about him in this period.

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Chapter 5

The Elusive Manuel the Armenian

The figure of Manuel has been the object of much debate since Henri Grégoire wrote two studies about his life and the confrontation he had with Theophobos during Theophilos' reign.¹ I have discussed elsewhere the apparent contradictions of the sources² and it is not my intention here to reconsider again the whole series of problems related to the two *Lives* of Manuel that supposedly were the main source of the Continuator and Genesisios, the authors who had preserved most of the information about Manuel. However, as Manuel is in fact one of the main protagonists during the reign of Theophilos, it is unavoidable to discuss piecemeal the evidence provided by our sources as far as it is connected with events. Thus we will now review briefly the report of the sources on the origins and exile of Manuel.

5.1 Why *Amalekites*?

Manuel is labelled as Armenian in most of the sources. As a consequence, that he was the uncle of Theodora confirmed the Armenian descent of her family.³ But there is another intriguing piece of information about Manuel that has until now challenged every possible explanation: the naming of Manuel as “one of the men of Amalek” (τινος τῶν ἐξ Ἀμαληκίτων), as the Continuator does when he introduces him for the first time in his narrative.⁴ One would have expected that the Armenian origins of Manuel would have been referred to, so that the possibility that there is an error here in the text has been considered.⁵ However, as I noted some time ago,⁶ the same appellative is given to Leo the Armenian on several occasions, for example by Genesisios (twice τοῦ ἐξ Ἀμαλήκ, once τοῦ Ἀμαληκίτου) or Pseudo-Symeon (τοῦ Ἀμαληκίτου).⁷ More revealing, Ignatios the Deacon,

¹ Grégoire (1933), (1934).

² See Signes Codoñer (1995) 496–9, 509–10, 513–34 and 564–9, (2006) 86–96 and (2013a).

³ Th. Cont. IV.I (148.13–14): Μανουὴλ ὁ μάγιστρος ἐξ Ἀρμενίων καταγόμενος, ὃς καὶ θεῖος ἀπὸ πατρὸς τῆς δεσποίνης ὑπῆρχεν.

⁴ Th. Cont. I.9 (18.9).

⁵ Signes Codoñer (1995) 83 and *PmbZ* #4707, 138, note 1.

⁶ Signes Codoñer (1991) 312, (1994) 364, (1995) 77.

⁷ Gen. I title (3.2), I proem (3.17) and IV.2 (56.40), Pseudo-Symeon 650.

writing shortly after Nikephoros' death in 828,⁸ already compares Leo in his *Life of Nikephoros* with the ancient Amalekitai. For Ignatios, Leo “displayed to the New Israel actions even more terrible than those of the Amalekitai”.⁹

There is therefore no error in the sources that refer to both Leo and Manuel as Amalekitai. But what reason could have moved these authors to refer to the two Armenians as the biblical Amalekitai who harassed Moses during their exodus from Egypt?¹⁰ Ignatios provides a some clue, for he further compares Leo with three more biblical figures: the Assyrian king Sennacherim, who besieged Jerusalem in the times of king Hezekiah in 701 BC, without finally seizing the city, but being punished with heavy losses in his army (4 Kings 19:35 and Isaiah 37:37); Rapsakes (the name of an Assyrian commander), who was sent by Sennacherim to Jerusalem to convince Hezekiah to surrender and threatened him with utter destruction (4 Kings 18:17–19:13 and Isaiah 36–37); and Nabouzardan, the chief cook of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army, who entered Jerusalem and burned all the houses of the city in 587 BC (4 Kings 25:8–12). These three references put us in a biblical context and remind us of episodes that occurred in biblical accounts of the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires. Nothing special perhaps, for the Byzantines often referred to biblical parallels. However, the Continuator and George the Monk, among others, referred to the Assyrian ancestry of Leo the Armenian,¹¹ so that we may suspect that the connection made by Ignatios here is not a coincidence. In fact, George the Monk mentions a lost work of the patriarch Nikephoros as his source, when he launches an invective against Leo asserting that his lineage descended from Sennacherim, specifically from two of his sons who murdered their father and took refuge in Armenia. Nikephoros (if George the Monk is truly copying his words) apparently got this piece of genealogical information from the “stories of some old men” (καθὰ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ἐξιστοροῦσί τινες).

In an old study Nicolas Adontz connected this story with a family tradition of the Ardzruni, who claimed to descend from Sennacherim's sons. This tradition was first transmitted by Moses of Chorene.¹² Later Cyril Toumanoff connected Leo with the Gnuni instead.¹³ In an earlier publication, I rejected this “Assyrian” ancestry for Leo for various reasons, but especially because the legend, as told by the Byzantine authors, was intended to slander Leo, making him the scion of

⁸ Kazhdan (1999) 344–5.

⁹ Ignatios, *Life of Nikephoros* 162.27–28: Ἀμαληκτῶν δεινότερα τῷ νέφῳ Ἰσραὴλ ἐνδειξάμενον.

¹⁰ Exodus 17:8–16.

¹¹ Th. Cont. I.1 (6.4–8) and Georg. Mon. IX.41 (780.13–782.11).

¹² Adontz (1965). See Brosset (1874–1876) vol. 1, 40 and 106 for two references to the legend in the history of Thomas Ardzrouni.

¹³ Toumanoff (1956a) note 228, (1963) 205, (1971) 135. Treadgold (1988) 196 accepted the Gnuni origin.

parricides.¹⁴ Nikephoros was evidently trying to attack Leo with all the means at his disposal and used this legend to disqualify him. It appeared therefore not likely that Leo, as David Turner suggested, might “have originally inspired the fiction of his Mesopotamian origins”.¹⁵

However, Christian Settiani has recently defended the historical background of the history and again connected Leo with the Ardzruni.¹⁶ He rightly stresses that these genealogical fictions were indeed taken very seriously by the Armenian nobles, so that if they believed in them, we must not discard their historical relevance for their contemporaries. This is obviously true, but the question is whether the genealogical construct referred to by Nikephoros was indeed Leo’s own or only taken by the iconophile patriarch from already existing legends to discredit him.

For us now, it is interesting to note that the “Amalekite” origin of Leo (and therefore of Manuel) could be also related to his “Assyrian” ancestry. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the above-mentioned passage from Ignatios’ work where Leo is compared with Amalek, Sennacherim, the latter’s general and Nebuchadnezzar’s cook, appears in his *Life of Nikephoros*. Ignatios may have been inspired by the same lost work of the patriarch, in which the “Assyrian” ancestry of the Armenian emperor was concocted. But as the Amalekitai of Southern Canaan do not seem to have any relation with the “Assyrian” legend of Leo’s origins, we may perhaps surmise that Nikephoros somehow made a word play of the term, as was usual for many writers of the time (and particularly in Methodios). Consider for example the case of Michael of Amorion, who is named by George the Monk not *amōraios* (ἀμωραῖος) but *amoraios* (ἀμορραῖος), hinting thus at the Amorites, the old inhabitants of Palestine and an old foe of the Jews, much like the Amalekitai.¹⁷ But what “Assyrian” name could have suggested to Nikephoros the word play with the Amalekites?

I suspect that this was the name of Adramalech (Ἀδραμαλεχ), one of the children of Sennacherim mentioned in the Septuagint as the son who murdered his father along with his brother Sarasar (Σαρασαρ) and later took refuge in Armenia. It is perhaps not a coincidence that this mention of the murder of Sennacherim by Adramalech and Sarasar appears in the Bible in 4 Kings 19:37 and Isaiah 37:38, exactly next to the mention of the Rapsakes alluded to in Ignatios and also in the same book (4 Kings) where Sennacherim and Nabouzardan are dealt with. This is an important point, for it would confirm that the story of the two sons of Sennacherim who fled to Armenia after murdering their father was indeed the one used by Nikephoros to slander Leo, perhaps basing it on some legends of

¹⁴ Signes Codoñer (1991) 313–7, (1994) 367–70 and (1995) 15–16. *PmbZ* #4244 scarcely mentions the passage of Georg. Mon. in p. 678, note 2 without giving any credence to it.

¹⁵ Turner (1990) 172.

¹⁶ Settiani (2006) 324–7.

¹⁷ Georg. Mon. IX.42 (792.7).

Armenian origin, which he connected with the Bible. It would not be a simple rhetorical reference to Sennacherim, like similar ones that appear again and again in contemporary sources.¹⁸ The reason that Nikephoros substitutes Amalēk (Ἀμαλῆκ) for the similar-sounding Adramalech (Ἀδραμαλέχ) could have been the fact that the name of Sennacherim's son had no significance whatsoever for the common reader (he is mentioned in passing only twice in the Bible), whereas the Amalekitai (like the Amoritai) were archetypal foes of the Jews and well known to any Christian.¹⁹

In fact the name Amalekites is used in other contexts to designate the national enemies of the empire (for example the Arabs),²⁰ but it seldom appears in connection with the iconoclasts. The only other mention I have been able to find appears in the *Life of Stephen the Younger* (written c. 807–809²¹), where Constantine V is called “a new Jebusite and Amalekites” (ὁ νέος Ἰεβουσαῖος καὶ Ἀμαληκίτης) for having contravened Moses' law (Lev. 19:27) when he ordered the beards of all male inhabitants of the empire to be shaved.²² The use of these tribal names for slandering Constantine V is easily explained here for they referred to Old Testament peoples who, like the famous iconoclast emperor, opposed Moses. It is always possible that Leo could have been named Amalekites for a similar reason, that is to say, for having opposed Moses' law. Nevertheless, we think that an additional reason must be found for explaining why it was only Leo among contemporary emperors or iconoclastic leaders of the ninth century who received this appellation. That Manuel is named “Amalekites” along with Leo in a similar straightforward way makes no sense if we accept that the name was used simply as a reference to the foes of the “Chosen People”.

I consider it therefore likely that the name Amalekites was given by Nikephoros to an inhabitant of the East such as Leo, not just for its Old Testament connotations, but because it was also a way to refer to his “Assyrian” ascendant through a kind of word play with the name of his ascendant Adramalech. The fact that Manuel was also referred to as an Amalekites might be an indication that he also shared the “Assyrian” ancestry of Leo in the eyes of some contemporaries, perhaps even of Nikephoros himself. It does not mean that Manuel was an Ardzruni or a Gnuni, but only that he was closely connected to the emperor and could therefore appear as a relative. Thus the “Assyrian” ancestry of Leo automatically reverted to him. The History of Vardan the Great provides the proof that we must not connect these genealogies with the real ancestries of the men, for in this text Manuel is named as Mamikonian.²³ Perhaps he was in fact a Mamikonian, as Settipani and many other

¹⁸ Georg. Mon. IX.42 (793.19–20) qualifies Thomas as τις ἄλλος Σεναχειρίμ.

¹⁹ See Georg. Mon. IX.I (494.8–10): καὶ τῷ μὲν Ἰησοῦ οἱ Ἄμορραῖοι ἠναντιοῦντο, τῷ δὲ Μωσῆ ὁ Ἀμαλῆκ ἀντεστρατεύετο.

²⁰ See Theoph. 332.10 and Signes Codoñer (1991) 312, note 23.

²¹ Auzépy (1997) 8–9.

²² *Life of Stephen the Younger* 137 (trans. 233).

²³ Vardan the Great 41 (182).

Armenian scholars think,²⁴ but this does not exclude the possibility that Manuel was also related to other Armenian clans, including that of Leo himself. In any case, we must be very careful with these genealogies, used by individuals for particular purposes but not necessarily reflecting any real ancestry.

5.2 Manuel's Service Under Michael I, Leo and Michael II

The first appearance of Manuel in the Continuator may seem puzzling if he was related to Leo, for, according to the Continuator, he counsels Michael I to face Leo's revolt instead of abdicating, as was Michael's intention.²⁵ However, the role of Manuel may have been distorted for several reasons, especially as at least one of his *Lives* was written after 843, when it was no longer convenient to display a close affinity to Leo. It is remarkable that the Continuator refers to Manuel as an "Amalekites" in this passage only, which connects him immediately with Leo. In fact, when Leo came to power, he rewarded Manuel with the command of the Anatolikoi or of the Armeniakoi, a very important position that could fall only to a reliable person. Be that as it may, Byzantine sources remain silent on Manuel's career during Michael Rhangabe's reign.

The Continuator says successively that Manuel was appointed strategos of the 'Armenians' by Leo V,²⁶ that he was in fact leading the troops of the Anatolikoi,²⁷ and, finally, that the theme of the Armeniakoi was under his command.²⁸ If the reference to the Armenians can be understood as being to the Armeniakoi, we would have Manuel with two different commands during Leo's reign.²⁹ Either Manuel held these two posts successively, or there is an error in some part of the text of the Continuator. If we assume the second possibility, then it would be easy perhaps to explain the reference to the Armenians in the first instance as a slip by the Continuator, who should have referred instead to the "Armenian origins" of Manuel. However, the concrete reference to a command of the Armeniakoi in the third instance is not explained away in this manner. As the Armenian origins are in fact expressly mentioned in the second instance, this could have provided the cause for substituting a more general "Anatolikoi" (meaning Eastern troops) for "Armeniakoi", as the theme commanded by Manuel, since the Continuator perhaps considered a reference to an "Armenian strategos of the Armeniakoi" misleading. I would tend therefore to consider that Manuel was appointed strategos of the Armeniakoi, and remained so for most of Leo's reign. A further source seems to confirm this view.

²⁴ Settipani (2006) 148–50.

²⁵ Th. Cont. I.9 (18.8–11).

²⁶ Th. Cont. I.12 (24.4): στρατηγὸν τιμήσας τῶν Ἀρμενίων.

²⁷ Th. Cont. III.19 (110.3–4): ἔξ Ἀρμενίων γὰρ τὴν γένεσιν ἦν, καὶ τοῦ στρατοῦ τῶν Ἀνατολικῶν ἐπὶ τοῦ Λέοντος προηγούμενος.

²⁸ Th. Cont. IV.1 (149.5–6): ὅτε τῶν Ἀρμενιακῶν ἐστρατήγει.

²⁹ See Signes Codoñer (1995) 104 for possible explanations of the discrepancies.

There is an important piece of information preserved in Michael the Syrian that provides us with additional information about Manuel's moves in the years 819–820. The passage can be translated as follows:

When the rebel Naṣr heard that Ma'mūn, king of the Taiyayē [Muslim Arabs], was about to come to Baghdad, he called his secretary, a well-educated Christian, and ordered him to write a letter for the patrician Emmanuel, as if he wanted to ally himself with the Romans. When the emperor Michael heard about this, he sent ambassadors. These arrived in Kaysum. Naṣr, who was at the time at Saruj, assembled the rebels and made the announcement, boasting of the coming ambassadors from the Romans. These rebels were infuriated for they said: "Do you want to irritate God by making you an apostate?" With these words they filled his soul with bitterness, so that he sent men to massacre the envoys of the Romans.³⁰

The Naṣr mentioned here, not to be confused with the Khurramite leader we will deal with in Chapter 10,³¹ was Naṣr ibn Shabath, an Arab chieftain from the 'Uqayl tribe who controlled the Jazīra region during the civil war period that followed the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd until his submission in 824–825 to Ma'mūn. His main strongholds were Kaysum and Saruj, mentioned here and lying to each side of the Euphrates, the first west of Samosata, to whose district it belonged, and the second west of Edessa.³² Michael the Syrian gives a lot of information about the man and his continuous raids against the caliph's troops over the years, for the region affected by his activity had as its main city Edessa, one of the most important centres of the Syrian or Jacobite church.³³ Moreover, Dionysios of Tell Mahrē, Jacobite patriarch between 818 and 848 and author of a very important *Annals* from the accession of the emperor Maurice to the death of Theophilos, lived for some time in the convent of Mar Jacob at Kaysum. Since Dionysios' *Annals* constituted one of the main sources used by Michael the Syrian, it is likely that the reference to the correspondence between Manuel and Naṣr was taken from him.³⁴

But when did these events take place? Naṣr is supposed to contact Manuel when he hears that Ma'mūn is approaching Baghdad. As Ma'mūn returned in fact to the capital of the caliphate in August 819, thus ending his long stay in Khurāsān (see Chapter 13.4), Naṣr should have contacted the Byzantines before that date, perhaps in spring 819, if not earlier. Undoubtedly the presence of the caliph in Baghdad implied a reinforcement of the central authority that threatened Naṣr's strongholds

³⁰ Mich. Syr. 500–501, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 36–7.

³¹ *PmbZ* #4707 seems to confuse both persons, for the article speaks on pp. 136–7 of contacts between the Persian rebel Naṣr and Manuel.

³² Mich. Syr. 510, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 52 mentions again these two localities as the main cities of Naṣr.

³³ Mich. Syr. 490–501, 505–7, 509–12, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 22–3, 25–7, 30–31, 36–9, 46–7 and 52–5.

³⁴ Weltecke (1997).

in the Jazīra, so that he perhaps considered it advisable to cover his back by opening negotiations with the Byzantines. Moreover, the Byzantine territory closest to the Jazīra was the Armeniakoi theme, which was accessed from Melitene and Adata through the passes of the Antitaurus mountains, whereas the theme of the Anatolikoi lay further southwest and was mostly accessible through the Cilician gates. This may mean that Manuel was strategos of the Armeniakoi in 819.

Moreover, we know from one letter of Theodore Stoudites that a certain Krateros was the strategos of the Anatolikoi in February 819,³⁵ and it seems unlikely that Manuel would have assumed the post immediately after, just in time to open negotiations with Naṣr, as Treadgold argues.³⁶

Nevertheless, the text of Michael the Syrian says neither that Manuel remained in office when Michael II sent ambassadors, nor that he was dismissed from it. Nor is Manuel mentioned as the strategos of the Armeniakoi when Thomas invaded Anatolia at the start of Michael's reign, for Olbianos held the post at that time.³⁷ Olbianos is mentioned as having remained faithful to Michael when he faced Thomas' attack, but this does not imply that he had been in charge since Leo's reign.³⁸ Since the other only strategos of Anatolia who took sides with Michael was precisely his cousin Katakylas, strategos of the Opsikian theme,³⁹ we may perhaps suppose that both were appointed by Michael immediately after his accession to power, replacing Leo's partisans. This does not however mean that all remaining strategoi in Anatolia were newly appointed by Michael. Some of Leo's partisans could have continued to hold their strategeiai in Anatolia, for Michael probably did not have sufficient time to replace them with new commanders: Thomas, who had begun his uprising under Leo, was already threatening Anatolia. Moreover, it was also not advisable for Michael to rearrange at once the whole chain of command in Anatolia, for this would have created a void of power precisely at the most critical moment, when the destiny of Anatolia was at stake. Accordingly, it comes as no

³⁵ Pratsch (1998) 257–8.

³⁶ According to Treadgold (1988) note 304, Theod. Stoud. says in his *Letter* Nr. 407 that he was transferred from Bonetta to Smyrna when a single strategos ruled “the five themes”. He further considers that Manuel was appointed “monostrategos” of the whole east (like Bardanes) after February 819, when Krateros was strategos of the Anatolikoi. However, in letter 407 Theodore mentions only that he was questioned by an “heresiarch” who tried to persuade him to abandon icon worship “by making mention of his authority, for he was put in charge of the five themes” (ἀνατίθεσθαι τοὺς τῆς ἐξαρχίας λόγους, ἐπὶ γὰρ τῶν πέντε θεμάτων τέθειται). There is no mention of any “strategos” in the text and the possibility of the man being some kind of ecclesiastical representative of the patriarch for the whole of Anatolia is more likely. *LbGr* s.v. ἐξαρχία gives the meaning “kirchliche Verwaltung, Amstbezirk (Funktion) eines Exarchen (Delegierten des Patriarchen)” with reference to this passage of *Letter* Nr. 407.

³⁷ Th. Cont. II.11 (54.1) and Gen. II.2 (23.4–5).

³⁸ *PmbZ* #5646 and *PBE* s.v. “Olbianos 3”.

³⁹ Th. Cont. II.11 (53.22) and Gen. II.2 (23.6) and II.3 (25.48).

surprise that most of the strategoi in Anatolia followed not Michael but Thomas,⁴⁰ especially if the latter artfully played his cards and now offered some support to them, as the case of Gregory Pterotos (see Chapter 3.3) clearly shows.

In any case, Manuel does not seem to play any role in the civil war, for Olbianos had probably taken over his command of the Armeniakoi. The reasons for Manuel's dismissal can only be guessed at, but I surmise that he was very close to Leo, perhaps even a relative, if the common appellation of "Amalekites" to both is not simply coincidence, as we argued in section 5.1. Leo could have filled some provincial posts with relatives, as Bardas, a cousin of his, was strategos of the Thrakesianoï in 819.⁴¹ We do not know whether Bardas was dismissed by Michael or not, but the hagiographical sources speak of a terrible end for him, probably related to the death of his uncle and protector Leo.⁴² I do not, however, think that the dismissal of Manuel as commander of the Armeniakoi followed the failed negotiations with the Arab rebel Naṣr. Surely, the massacre of the Roman ambassadors by Naṣr, as described by Michael the Syrian, was a humiliation for the Byzantine Empire and must have had political consequences. But it is interesting to note that Naṣr contacted Manuel in the spring of 819 at the latest and it was only Michael II at the beginning of 821 who answered his request positively and sent the ambassadors. The delay is perhaps explained by troubles in the east caused by Thomas' uprising that probably affected the area south of Edessa, where Naṣr had his stronghold. When, after Leo's murder, Michael finally contacted the Arab rebel with some difficulties, the situation had changed, for Thomas was now the leading force in the east. Naṣr simply let drop the matter by killing the ambassadors. And Manuel was probably not responsible for the failure.

5.3 Dating Manuel's Exile (I)

As we have argued, Manuel probably left his command in the Armeniakoi at the beginning of Michael's reign. However, the most detailed versions of his exile in the Greek sources say that Manuel left Byzantium and went over to the caliph in Theophilos' reign. Let us now consider the evidence in some detail.

The Continuator says that Manuel, after saving Theophilos from impending danger in a battle, was "fraudulently charged through slander with lèse-majesté

⁴⁰ Th. Cont. I.11 (53.21–54.2): "All Asia followed him [Thomas], except for Katakylas, general of the Opsikion and Olbianus of the Armeniakoi, for these generals proved to be the only who kept faith with Michael"; Gen. II.2 (23.2–24.7) in the translation of Kaldellis (1998) 28: "All the themes hurried to ally themselves with him [Thomas] along with their Strategoi. Only Olbianos, the Strategos of the Armeniacs, kept his troops in line by his shrewdness, and also Katakylas, the Strategos of the Opsikion theme, and they both remained loyal to Michael".

⁴¹ Pratsch (1998) 260–61.

⁴² *PmbZ* #789 and *PBE* s.v. "Bardas 30".

and conspiracy”, and indeed “by a few of his own associates” who were envious of his fame. Accordingly,

when he [Manuel] learnt from a man he trusted, who had formerly been Manuel’s servant but was now through favour a wine-pourer and attendant of Theophilos, that the latter was about to blind him and deprive him of his eyes, he undertook a rebellion and went over to the Hagarenes.⁴³

It is not easy to date Manuel’s exile by the battle previously fought,⁴⁴ for the Continuator neither provides a dating for it nor mentions any place name. In fact, the vague narrative of this battle, centred on the heroic rescue of Theophilos by Manuel, seems only to be conceived to provide an appropriate setting for the ensuing account of Manuel’s disgrace that is typically described as a consequence of his changing fortune.

A further battle referred to by the Continuator before this one makes it evident that the sequence of events in his work lacks any reliability.⁴⁵ The dating of this previous battle, fought now at Charsianon, is in fact controversial, for it can be dated either in 831 or, perhaps most probably, in 837.⁴⁶ Whatever the right dating is, this campaign at Charsianon could not have preceded Manuel’s exile, since he had already returned from it in 830, as we will see in Chapter 14.1. Moreover, it is clear that Theophilos could not have taken the field, be it with or without Manuel, before 830, for the emperor came to power in October 829!

It seems, therefore, that the Continuator inserted the account of the battle and the ensuing flight of Manuel to the Arabs at the point in his narrative that seemed to him the most appropriate for chronological considerations we cannot further specify. In fact, as I tried to demonstrate in my study of this author, the sequence of the battles of Theophilos in the Continuator is simply an arbitrary arrangement of different accounts taken from different sources and without absolute datings. The Continuator did his best to establish a chronological sequence, but he is not reliable in this respect.⁴⁷

The parallel narrative of Genesisios about this event, taken from the same source, provides us with a supplementary piece of evidence, for Genesisios says that Manuel’s slanderers “falsely accused him of planning a rebellion when he was strategos” (ἐπιλοιδοροῦσι ψευδῶς καθοσίωσιν στρατηγεύοντι).⁴⁸ Taken literally, this would mean that Manuel planned a conspiracy from his position as strategos, but as no command of Manuel is mentioned during Theophilos’ reign this is again of no help. Moreover, considering the rhetorical tendency of Genesisios, the

⁴³ Th. Cont. III.25 (118.4–12).

⁴⁴ Th. Cont. III.24 (116.9–118.3).

⁴⁵ Th. Cont. III.23 (114.17–116.8),

⁴⁶ For the dating and identification of the battle see Chapter 15.2.

⁴⁷ Signes Codoñer (1995) 668–9.

⁴⁸ Gen. III.9 (44.23–24).

participle στρατηγέουντι could be understood in a general way, referring only to the leading of a campaign. Finally, Genesis does not preserve any account of the campaign fought in Charsianon and places Manuel's exile after an account of Theophobos' rebellion (838) and death (shortly before Theophilos' own death in 842).⁴⁹ Genesis, usually unconcerned with the chronological order of his sources, is also not reliable.

According to the Logothete's chronicle, Manuel was "the most famous commander of all the Eastern troops" (ὁ ὀνομαστότατος στρατηλάτης πάντων τῶν ἐν Ἀνατολῇ) and was "held in great honour by the emperor" (τιμώμενος παρὰ τοῦ βασιλέως). But it happened that after exchanging some words with Myron, the logothete of the dromos and the father-in-law of Petronas, he was falsely accused by Myron before the emperor "of claiming the imperial power and planning terrible deeds against him" (ὡς τῆς βασιλείας ὀρέγεται καὶ ἐμελεῖτο δεινὰ κατ' αὐτοῦ). Although the protobestiarios Leo denounced this accusation as false to the emperor, Manuel feared the emperor's rage and secretly abandoned the city and rode without stopping until he arrived at the passes of Syria, joining the Arabs.⁵⁰

This information is inserted in the reign of Theophilos, but as Warren Treadgold rightly observed, it is a later addition, intended to provide biographical background at the moment when the chronicler intends to describe Manuel's participation along with Theophilos in the expedition of 837 against Sozopetra and Arsamosata.⁵¹ The chronicler, who mentions Manuel for the first time at this point in his work, here traces the previous biography of the famous general from his exile up to this campaign. Accordingly, the only thing that can be deduced from the Logothete is that Manuel went into exile long before 837, for his exile in the caliphate lasted some years, as we shall see.

But if Manuel's exile among the Arabs lasted some years and we know that he had already returned to Byzantium in 830, there is the possibility that he had already passed over to the caliphate during Michael's reign. In fact, the Logothete does not give any name to the emperor with whom Manuel quarrelled. Here, the reference to Myron and Petronas can be of some aid. Petronas was evidently Theodora's brother, who came to prominence during the reign of his brother-in-law Theophilos, but was already related to the imperial family in 821, when his sister Theodora married Michael's son. As we suggested in Chapter 4.1, the marriages of Theodora's sisters probably took place during Michael's reign. Possibly Petronas also married at that time. But he is not the protagonist of the episode, otherwise he would have been referred to as Manuel's nephew. It is moreover Myron, the father-in-law of Petronas, who takes the lead in denouncing Manuel.⁵² He must accordingly have been older than Petronas, perhaps even older than Manuel himself. He could perhaps be identified with the Myron addressed by

⁴⁹ Gen. III.8 (42.71–43.3).

⁵⁰ Log. (A), *Theophilos* [130] 15–16 (220.103–221.115).

⁵¹ Treadgold (1979b) 172.

⁵² *PmbZ* #5214 and *PBE* s.v. "Myron 2".

Theodore Stoudites in a letter dated 815–818.⁵³ In this letter, Myron is addressed as an important dignitary and his support to the Stoudites and fidelity to orthodoxy is praised. This raises no objection with identifying him with Petronas' father-in-law, as he could have remained an iconophile and, despite this, a true servant first of Leo the Armenian and then of his successor Michael of Amorion, who relaxed the persecution against icon worshippers. Theodore Stoudites corresponded with other members of the imperial family who were icon worshippers, like Leo's widow Theodosia.⁵⁴

There seems to be some confusion in the oriental sources about the exact beginning of Theophilos' reign and his role in the last years of Michael's reign. Thus Michael the Syrian asserts that Michael resigned as emperor after marrying Euphrosyne, "for men who marry twice cannot reign over the Romans". Theophilos received the crown of his father, who lived on "four more years after his son's reign had begun, but he neither bore the imperial crown nor seated on the imperial throne".⁵⁵ As Michael married Euphrosyne c. 824 and died 829, this later phase of his reign lasted four or five years and is *grosso modo* in accordance with the chronological indications of Michael the Syrian. Michael is mistaken about the prohibition of a second marriage for emperors (and normal people) in the Orthodox Church, although the fact that Euphrosyne was a nun and the mourning was not respected could explain the scandal. What could have caused Michael the Syrian, or better his source, the patriarch Dionysios of Tell Mahrē († 848), to speak about a ban on second marriages in the church?

Michael also reports in his chronicle that some noblemen tried to convince Constantine V to remarry after the death of his first wife, for they knew that emperors could not reign if they took a second wife. Constantine, knowing this interdiction, made the nobles swear that they would recognize his son as emperor in his place. They accepted and Constantine continued to rule as emperor under the formal authority of his son Leo IV until his own death.⁵⁶ Also Michael II, as we shall see in Chapter 6, was concerned about the accession of his children to power and forced the senate to accept them as heirs, but in his case his concern was about the future children of his second wife. Another difference is that Constantine in fact married three times and third marriages were, if not condemned, viewed with diffidence by the Orthodox Church. There was some scandal over Constantine's third marriage,⁵⁷ perhaps comparable with Michael's marriage to a nun.

Nevertheless, the fact is that Michael the Amorion is described by Michael the Syrian as having played no role as emperor after his second marriage. No other source mentions that Theophilos could have actually shared the power with his father beyond his nominal position as co-emperor. But this is in principle not

⁵³ Theod. Stoud., *Letters*, Nr. 259. See *PmbZ* #5213 and *PBE* s.v. "Myron 3".

⁵⁴ Theod. Stoud., *Letters*, Nr. 538.

⁵⁵ Mich. Syr. 522, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 72.

⁵⁶ Mich. Syr. 471–2, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 2, 517–18.

⁵⁷ Rochow (1994) 11–15.

inconceivable. In fact, Theophilos had already taken part in some military actions during the civil war.⁵⁸ Moreover, we do not know how long Michael suffered from the kidney disease to which he finally succumbed,⁵⁹ but Theophilos could have assumed more tasks in face of the increasing inability of his father. This could have fuelled stories about Michael's resignation after his second marriage. Finally, we cannot ignore that Theophilos as co-emperor could have taken some decisions of his own during his father's reign and that the exile of Manuel could reflect some kind of "family troubles", for Manuel was the uncle of Theophilos' wife.

There are further chronological problems with the beginning of Theophilos' reign in Ṭabarī. The Arab historian tells us in HA 209 (4 May 824 to 23 April 825) that: "In this year, there died Michael son of George, emperor of Byzantium, who had reigned for nine years. The Byzantines appointed as ruler over themselves Theophilos son of Michael".⁶⁰ Curiously enough, Ṭabarī and Michael the Syrian make Theophilos' reign begin in the same year. But Ṭabarī also puts Leo's death four years too early, as he mentions his murder in HA 200 (11 August 815 to 29 July 816),⁶¹ so that the whole chronology of the Byzantine emperors of the period is displaced.

We do not know where the original error lay (a gap produced by Thomas' uprising?) and whether the erroneous dating of Michael's death together with a correct reckoning of his regnal years (nine) affected the dating of Leo's murder. Unfortunately, the reign of Michael II is not mentioned by many Arab authors, so that we cannot check how widespread this false dating could have been in other oriental sources.⁶² However, if Theophilos was already crowned as co-emperor in 821 and took part in some events during the reign of his father, some oriental writers could have considered him the reigning emperor before Michael's death – especially if Theophilos was somehow responsible for Manuel's exile during his father's reign.

5.4 The Akrites Manuel

Before we proceed further with the problem of providing a date for Manuel's exile, it is important to remark at this point that the information hagiographers collected when composing Manuel's two *Lives* (now lost, but preserved through the use the chroniclers made of them) must not be interpreted merely from the narrow point of

⁵⁸ *PmbZ* #8167 (629).

⁵⁹ Treadgold (1988) 257–8.

⁶⁰ Ṭabarī III.1073, trans. Bosworth (1987) 144.

⁶¹ Ṭabarī III.1001, trans. Bosworth (1987) 45.

⁶² Eutychios, *Annals* 408, makes Michael (III) follow Theophilos when the latter died during the caliphate of al Wāthiq (842–847) but again in 409 makes Theophilos follow Michael (II?) when he died during the caliphate of Mutawakkil (847–861). For these chronological problems see further Griffith (1982) 168–73 and Chapter 21.7.

view of a Constantinopolitan monastery extolling its founder, as all scholars have believed since the studies of Henri Grégoire.⁶³ As Manuel's hagiographers based their work on previous sources, the nature of these must be considered along with the intentions of the writers themselves. I do not mean that these sources were mistaken about the chronology of the emperors reigning in Byzantium, as in the cases of Michael the Syrian and Ṭabarī. But it could be that these sources were also eastern in a certain sense and, focusing on Manuel as their hero, were unconcerned about the major political figures of the time. This is particularly likely for all the events related to Manuel's exile and his stay among the Arabs. In fact, some details of Manuel's life at this time have an oriental colour and suggest some kind of oral reports about his activities in the east. To put it plainly, Manuel's life seems in certain episodes to have been modelled on the epic account of a frontier-warrior, an *akrites*.⁶⁴ Let us examine some instances.

To begin with, when Manuel stayed in Baghdad he is said by the Continuator to have won many victories over the enemies of the caliph with the help of Roman prisoners on whose behalf he had given the Hagarenes guarantees that they would not escape. The Continuator describes these victories in the following way:

It was then, according to the report, that he took Chorosan and made it submit to the Ameramnounes not only through the excellent courage of the men but also their somehow strange and altered appearance, for the change of garments and unexpected variation of languages threw the enemy into fright. What is more, he delivered them from the many wild beasts which were causing them injury and harm, and having become a cause of great benefit to them he was especially loved by the ruler himself and his council.⁶⁵

There are some points of interest here. First, it is said plainly that Manuel contributed to conquering the Khurāsān, which cannot be the case, as the Khurāsān was the region where caliph Ma'mūn had always had his main support and resided for years until his return to Baghdad in 819. Perhaps there was some misunderstanding on the part of the Greek author and the text said only that Manuel fought in that vast region and helped the caliph Ma'mūn to crush some dissidents in the east.⁶⁶ But it

⁶³ Grégoire (1934).

⁶⁴ See Beck (1971) 48–97 for an overview of this kind of epic song, and the introduction in Jeffreys (1998) for more specific details on the *Digenis*.

⁶⁵ Th. Cont. III.25 (118.19–119.4): ὅτε καὶ τὸ Χοροσάν λέγεται κατασχεῖν καὶ τῷ ἀμεραμουνῆ ὑποτάξει οὐ τῷ διαφέρειν μόνον εἰς ἀνδρείαν αὐτοῖς, ἀλλὰ τῷ καὶ καινῶς πως καὶ παρηλλαγμένως ὀφθῆναι αὐτοῖς· ἦ τε γὰρ τῶν σχημάτων μεταβολὴ καὶ ἡ τῶν φωνῶν παρὰ δόξαν ἐξαλλαγὴ εἰς δειλίαν ἐπιτίπτειν ἠνάγκαζε τοὺς πολεμίους. Οὐ μὴν δὲ ἀλλὰ καὶ πολλῶν ἀτιθάσσων θηρίων κατασινομένων αὐτοὺς καὶ βλαπτόντων ἐλευθερώσας, καὶ μεγάλων αἰτίος καλῶν αὐτοῖς γεγρονῶς, διαφερόντως ἠγαπήθη αὐτῷ τε τῷ ἄρχοντι καὶ τῇ γερουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ.

⁶⁶ In this sense see Signes Codoñer (1995) 519.

could also be that some kind of literary distortion, not to say exaggeration, is taking place here: the author represents Manuel's exploits in a bombastic manner, linking him with the conquest of the most important region of the Abbasid caliphate. Second, the simple appearance of Manuel's warriors reportedly threw the enemies into fright, a remark typical of epic poetry. Third, among the exploits of Manuel a strange fight against "many wild beasts" (πολλῶν ἀτιθάσσων θηρίων) is mentioned that also derives from the realm of popular epic. The beasts fought by the epic hero could be lions or dragons, but this does not change anything about the fact that these episodes are not history, but literary embellishment. See for example the importance given in the *Digenis* to the fighting of wild beasts as a way through which the hero, aged only 12 at the time, tests himself and increases in prestige.⁶⁷

A further episode in Manuel's exile is the secret embassy of John the Grammarian to Baghdad to interview the prominent exile and convey to him Theophilos' pardon. The Continuator describes thus how John succeeded in meeting Manuel at his house in Baghdad without being noticed:

Iannes was dispatched by Theophilos' wish from our country and changed his dress; and assimilating himself and mixing in with the rag-wearing Iberians and monks who travel to Jerusalem in prayer he established himself in the house where Manuel dwelt in Baghdad, pretending to beg and telling Manuel of the emperor's regret. As testimony of what he said, he gave him the emperor's medallion and chrysobull, which promised sympathetic affection and complete amnesty of wrongs. Taking these in his hands, as if fired in his soul, Manuel took thought for his return home.⁶⁸

It was usual for emperors to give some *enkolpion* or personal object as a guarantee of their word, and Nikephoros is also said to have sent a little cross of his to Bardanes the Turk to confirm his pardon.⁶⁹ But here the sending of the *enkolpion* only enhances the dramatic effect of the ambassador who disguises himself as a mendicant monk in order to visit secretly Manuel's house in Baghdad. This recasts history as folktale or romance, for no official ambassador of Theophilos would have remained unnoticed in Baghdad.⁷⁰ And to make such a

⁶⁷ *Digenis Akrites* G.IV.72–195.

⁶⁸ Th. Cont. III.26 (119.14–23): ἡ τὸν Ἰαννὴν γνώμη τοῦ Θεοφίλου ἀφ' ἡμῶν μεταστήσασα καὶ μεταμφιάσασα καὶ τοῖς ῥακοδυτοῦσιν Ἰβηρσι καὶ μοναχοῖς τοῖς πρὸς τὰ Ἱεροσόλυμα μετὰ λιτῆς φοιτῶσιν ἐξομοιώσασά τε καὶ συγκαταμίξασα τῷ ἐν ᾧ διητῆτο οἴκῳ ὁ Μανουὴλ κατὰ τὸ Βαγδὰ ἐγκατέστησεν ἐπαιτεῖν τε προσποιησάμενον καὶ τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως μετάνοιαν ἀναδιδάσκοντα. Καὶ μάρτυρας τῶν εἰρημένων τό τε τοῦ βασιλέως ἐγκόλπιον καὶ τὸ χρυσοβούλλιον ἐδίδου, συμπάθειάν τε καὶ παντελεῖ κακῶν ἀμνηστίαν εὐαγγελιζόμενα· ἃ καὶ λαβὼν εἰς χεῖρας ὁ Μανουὴλ, καὶ οἰονεῖ τὴν ψυχὴν ἀνακαεῖς, τὴν οἴκαδε ἐμελέτα ἐπάνοδον.

⁶⁹ Th. Cont. I.3 (9.15–17).

⁷⁰ The official purpose of the embassy is even clearer in Gen. III.10.

long journey in the disguise of a mendicant monk is obviously unnecessary: there were easier ways to contact exiles! Or should we think that Byzantine diplomacy acted through secret agents, in a kind of commando mission? And what if the secret agent was John the Grammarian himself, as seems to be the case?⁷¹ No need for that, especially if one considers the important role of disguises in epic tales since the days of the *Odyssey*.⁷² Finally, the awakening in Manuel's heart of his Christian feelings when grasping the emperor's medallion is another moving episode from an edifying story describing the return of the faithful and orthodox exile to the country from which he was unjustly expelled. It is no coincidence that the text emphasizes more than once that Manuel never converted to Islam during his long stay among the Arabs.⁷³

A third passage will confirm that we are facing here a literary fictionalization of the events and not a simple recording of facts. It concerns the moment when Manuel says farewell to the caliph's son ('Abbās), who had hitherto been his best friend, for he wants to return to his country, where he belongs:

For as they approached the place, Manuel embraced many times Ismael's son and said, "Go, my child, go safe to your father, and know that I go to none other than my emperor and lord indeed".⁷⁴

Friendship between a Muslim and a Christian is very common in the Byzantine frontier epic, as the case of the *Digenis* epic clearly shows, where the protagonist is named the "Twyborn" because he was born of two races, a Muslim emir and the daughter of a Byzantine general. At *Digenis*' death Christians and Muslims came together to his burial.⁷⁵

⁷¹ The monk is named Jannes three times, the surname the iconophiles gave to the famous iconoclastic patriarch, but also a popular hypocoristic variant of Ioannes.

⁷² The fact that John the Grammarian disguises himself as an Iberian monk is perhaps evidence of a close relation between the Iberian Bagratids and the Abasgians with the Byzantines during this period, as considered in Chapter 15.2–3. The Iberians descending to Jerusalem probably crossed the lands of the caliphate but they passed not through Baghdad, but Syria. For Iberian monasticism and its presence in Palestine (specially at Saint Sabas) see Martin-Hisard (1993) 567–76.

⁷³ Compare for example the fidelity of *Digenis*' grandfather with the Islamic faith when he was taken captive by the Byzantines, as described by *Digenis*' grandmother to her apostate son: "For when the Roman armies encircled him, / the generals swore him most terrible oaths / that he would be honoured as a patrikios by the emperor / and become a protostrator, if he were to throw down his sword. / But he kept the Prophet's commandments, / spurned renown and paid no attention to wealth" (*Digenis Akrites* G.II.66–71). Curiously enough, Manuel was protostrator under Michael I.

⁷⁴ Th. Cont. III.26 (120.15–19): ἄρτι γὰρ ἐκεῖσε δὴ που ἐπλησίαζον, καὶ πολλὰ τὸν τοῦ Ἰσμαὴλ υἱὸν κατασπασάμενος "Ἀπιθ", ἔφη, «ὕγις, ἄπιθ, τέκνον, πρὸς τὸν πατέρα σου· ἐμὲ δὲ ἴσθι πορευόμενον οὐ πρὸς ἄλλον, πρὸς δὲ τὸν ἐμὸν ὄντως βασιλέα καὶ κύριον".

⁷⁵ *Digenis Akrites* G.VIII.202–10.

Significantly, all these moving and picturesque scenes have been removed by Genesios from his narrative,⁷⁶ where there are neither fights against beasts, nor disguises of John, nor a moving farewell to the caliph's son. This is certainly not by chance, as Genesios surely detected the fictional and literary character of these episodes and considered them inappropriate for his “historical” narration. The proof is provided by Genesios himself, who labels Manuel as “our own Achilles” (τὸν καθ’ ἡμᾶς Ἀχιλλεῖα)⁷⁷ when mentioning his exile among the Arabs. As Achilles was undoubtedly one of the epic heroes par excellence,⁷⁸ Genesios wanted to introduce Manuel as such to his readers, who may have been more conscious than we are of the fictional and epic character of the sources about Manuel, perhaps a popular figure of Byzantine heroic poetry at the time.

The use of oral or popular poetry by Genesios and the Continuator to shape history is likely not only in the case of Manuel, but also in other instances of their narrative of the period. Thus the Continuator, after referring to the defeat of the last of Thomas’ fighters in east Anatolia, mentions the existence of a complementary source for these events, where a jongleur plays a leading role. This man, perhaps named Gyberin (τὸ Γυβέριν),⁷⁹ is described as a “certain rustic man, who cared about his voice and rejoiced in the harmony of the songs, these rustic ones and without meter” (ἄνδρα τινα ἄγορικον ... φωνῆς ἐπιμελούμενον καὶ ταῖς ὠδαῖς τερπόμενον ἐμμελῶς ταῖς ἀνειμέναις ταύταις καὶ ἀγροϊτικαῖς). This man contacted through a song the *oikonomos* of the rebel Gazarenos and convinced him to betray his master.⁸⁰ These ἥρωικὰ τραγούδια seem to have been popular at the time, for some later epic compositions were apparently based on events of the ninth century, such as the seizure of Amorion by the Arabs. Arethas of Patras mentions in a scholion jongleurs of Paphlagonia who sang these stories from house to house.⁸¹ Paphlagonia was the land from which Theodora’s (and accordingly Manuel’s) family came.

In contemporary history many biographies parallel to that of Manuel can be read, such as that of the Armenian Tatzates of the Andzevatsi family who, after faithfully serving Constantine V and Leo IV for 22 years since 760, suffered relegation at Eirene’s court because of his hatred for the eunuch Staurakios and

⁷⁶ Gen. III.10 and 17.

⁷⁷ Gen. III.10 (44.29).

⁷⁸ There is even a poem in political verses about Achilles composed in the Palaiologan period and named *Achilleis*, of which several versions are preserved. See also *Digenis Akrites* G.VII.85 for another reference to Achilles.

⁷⁹ See *PmbZ* #2532 and *PBE* s.v. “Guberios I”. We have notice of Γουβέρ as a family name in the second half of the ninth century (see *PmbZ* #1452 and 2527 and *PBE* s.v. “Gumer I”), but it is hard to say if the forms are related. As a matter the fact, the name in the text may not refer to the jongleur, but to the governor (“gubernio” or even “gubernis” are attested in later Latin) who sent him to contact Gazarenos. An Arab word may also be behind the *Gyberin* (Arabic ‘*ibriyu* for Jew?).

⁸⁰ Th. Cont. III.19 (72.13–73.4).

⁸¹ Beck (1971) 50.

went back to the service of the Muslims. Caliph Mahdī even appointed him prince of Armenia in 782.⁸² Ghewond says that Hārūn al-Rashīd, the son of Mahdī, “even considered him as his father”, a situation that recalls the close ties between Manuel and ‘Abbās. The memory of these akrites-fighters was not only occasionally preserved through the offices of the Church,⁸³ but also through local cults, as is illustrated by an image recently found by Nicole Thierry in a rural church in Cappadocia, near Koron.⁸⁴ The image, dating perhaps to the ninth century, represents two mounted soldiers confronting a devil lying in the middle, which they pierce with their lances. An inscription identifies them as the scribon Leo, who is said to have been buried on the spot (probably near to the place where he was slain), and the tourmarches Michael, who probably died at the same time. No better evidence can be found of the preservation of the memory of these frontier soldiers by the same communities for which they were fighting. The birth of the oral epic tradition was probably not unrelated to this pious preservation of the memory of the fallen in the battlefield.

In conclusion, it can be taken for granted that some of the information used either by the Continuator or by his source (the *Lives* of Manuel) was based on oral traditions about the Armenian general, who was probably a popular figure at the time, having led an adventurous life on both sides of the eastern frontier.

5.5 Dating Manuel’s Exile (II)

The ultimate oral origin of some of the sources about Manuel has important consequences for the dating, for these kinds of popular stories and songs are usually unconcerned with chronology. It could therefore be that Manuel went into exile during the reign of Michael II and returned to Byzantium with Theophilos, but that these sources also made Theophilos responsible for Manuel’s exile for the sake of simplification, just to avoid too many “characters” featuring in the story.

Moreover, there is also positive evidence for Manuel’s exile beginning in Michael’s reign. The Continuator, after stating that Manuel fled to the Arabs at the beginning of Theophilos’ reign and telling the whole story of his stay among

⁸² See Ghewond 140–43 and Theoph. 456. See Tritle (1977) 279–300 for a detailed study of the personality of Tatzates. Tritle considers his motives for leaving Armenia for Byzantium as having to do with the prospect of a lucrative service in the army. His final return to the service of the caliph had rather to do with Eirene’s dismissal of the iconoclast strategoi.

⁸³ Détorakis and Mossay (1988) edit a *Triodion* they date to the end of the ninth century or the beginning of the tenth, where an appeal is made for keeping alive the memory of the soldiers who died on the battlefield against the barbarians. See vv. 192 (μνήμιας τιμάσθωσαν), 248–9 (μνήμης ἀξίως παρ’ αὐτῶν ἀντιτυγχάνετε) and 319–20 (ὄν σήμερον τὴν μνήμημιν ἐπιτελοῦμεν πιστῶς).

⁸⁴ Thierry (2009).

the Arabs and his return to Byzantium, makes an interesting remark to close this section of his narrative:

There are also those who say that Manuel fled to the descendants of Hagar and returned through the solicitude of Theophilos, but that he did not flee under accusation of *lèse-majesté* in the time of Theophilos but rather of his father Michael the Stammerer, and was either driven by his hatred for the latter or else feared an old enmity on his part.⁸⁵

This indication, which is lacking in Genesisios (who usually avoids discussing the problems caused by conflicting sources), is corroborated by an independent source, the Armenian history of Vardan the Great. There we read the following about Manuel's exile in connection with an account of Leo's murder:

Michael had attempted to kill him [Leo]. He had not succeeded, and when the emperor heard of it he wished to put him to death. But he was entreated by the empress [to delay] until Easter day had passed; therefore he was put in prison. The jailer was a friend of Michael's who had bribed the *manglabitai* – who are the royal courtiers and intimates. These unexpectedly fell on the emperor with their swords in the church at the hour of the liturgy. He fled to the altar, which he grasped. But they mercilessly slew him on the spot like wild beasts. So Michael became emperor. He went out to seek the great general Manuel Mamikonean. The latter hastened to Kamax, where he took refuge with 150 men. From there [he went] to Mamun, the prince of the Muslims, who had killed his brother Mahmet and was ruling over the *Tačiks*. He greatly honoured him, provided a stipend of 1306 measures of silver per diem, and other immeasurable and incalculable presents daily.⁸⁶

According to all this evidence, it is safe to conclude that Manuel took flight to the Arabs at the beginning of Michael's reign, probably in connection with the civil war and after he had lost his command in the theme of the *Armeniakoï*. We do not know the reasons for his quarrel with Michael and whether his status as Leo's close supporter played a role. Furthermore, we do not know what the marriage of his niece Theodora with Theophilos meant for his position in the palace and in what kind of conspiracy he could have been involved, provided the accusation of Myron against him was true. But it is not unreasonable to suppose that Manuel was a victim of the balances of power during the first part of Michael's reign,

⁸⁵ Th. Cont. III.26 (120.23–121.5): Εἰσὶ δ' οἱ φυγῆ μὲν χρήσασθαι τὸν Μανουήλ φασὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἐξ Ἄγαρ, καὶ διὰ τὴν Θεοφίλου, ὡς εἴρηται, ἐπανεληθόντα σπουδῆν, οὐ μὴν καθοσίωσιν ἐγκληθέντα ἐπὶ Θεοφίλου φυγεῖν, ἐπὶ Μιχαὴλ δὲ τοῦ Τραυλοῦ τοῦ τούτου πατρός, εἴτε καὶ μίσει τῷ πρὸς αὐτὸν φερόμενον, εἴτε δὴ καὶ παλαιὰν δεδοικότα μῆνιν αὐτοῦ.

⁸⁶ Vardan the Great 182.

as the Amorian felt unsure about his allies and was faced by Thomas' uprising. Manuel's exile did not necessarily mean that all former supporters of Leo sided with Thomas, for we have seen that Thomas rebelled against Leo (Chapter 2.1) and that division prevailed among Leo's partisans in his last years. It is however clear that his return to Byzantium at the very beginning of Theophilos' reign had a symbolic value, as if the new emperor tried to recover some kind of lost consensus among the former supporters of Leo.

The return of Manuel to Byzantium was one of the first political consequences of Theophilos' rise to power. Perhaps the punishment of Leo's murders by Theophilos at the very beginning of his reign, which we discussed above in Chapter 3.3, was thought by the emperor to be a step towards reconciliation with some of the former supporters of Leo, Manuel included. These partisans of Leo were probably alienated from Michael without following Thomas and were therefore potentially recoverable as supporters for the new emperor. Theophilos wanted, understandably, to widen the spectrum of his supporters but also perhaps to move away from Michael's policy for some ideological or personal reasons. The fact that Theophilos was a more fervid adherent of iconoclasm than his father may provide an easy explanation for the change. But in order to start anew Theophilos also had to get rid of Euphrosyne, Michael's second wife and Theophilos' stepmother. Let us now consider what Michael's marriage with Euphrosyne in 824 could have meant and how her banishment from the palace by Theophilos is to be interpreted.

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Chapter 6

The Daughter of Constantine VI and her Stepson

6.1 Marrying a Nun to Obtain Legitimacy

The political balance at court changed with the end of the civil war. By then Michael's wife, Thekla, was dead. The widower emperor decided to contract a second marriage, and Euphrosyne, a daughter of Constantine VI, was elected as the new empress. We know the date from Michael the Syrian, who says that Thekla died in the fourth year of Michael's reign, that is to say, in 824.¹ The marriage with Euphrosyne probably took place shortly afterwards. The sequence of events in the Continuator seems to corroborate a dating of c. 824–825.²

Michael's was surely a bold decision, for Euphrosyne had been a nun since 795, when the emperor Constantine VI divorced his wife, Maria of Amnia, Euphrosyne's mother, and married his mistress Theodote. Both Maria and Euphrosyne then retired to a monastery for nuns on the island of Prinkipo. Michael's marriage to a nun was to provoke scandal and rejection for canonical reasons. The Continuator considers the marriage a fornication (πορνεία)³ and Theodore Stoudites also condemns the event.⁴ Why did Michael take the risk? He must have known of the scandal caused by the earlier marriage of Constantine to Theodote, but probably considered it more important to legitimate and strengthen his position as emperor (he was a parvenu without any noble ancestry) by linking his dynasty with that of the Isaurians. This was precisely what Thomas had intended to do when he pretended to be Constantine VI. Even Leo the Armenian changed the name of his son Symbatios to Constantine probably for the same reasons.⁵

However, Michael's decision was hazardous not only because his chosen wife was a nun, but also because it implied some change of policy. According to the Continuator,⁶ the emperor did not want to appear to disregard the due mourning for his deceased wife, so that he forced the senate in secret to urge him publicly to contract a new marriage. The excuse was that an emperor could not reign without

¹ Michael the Syrian 522, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 72.

² Signes Codoñer (1995) 320–21.

³ Th. Cont. I.8 (49.3–4).

⁴ Pratsch (1998) 83–114 and 147–78, and Cholij (2002) 38–53.

⁵ Signes Codoñer (1995) 176. See Speck (1978) 387 for a positive image of Constantine VI at that time.

⁶ Th. Cont. II.24 (78.4–79.12).

an empress at his side. The senators even feigned to begin an insurrection if the emperor did not yield to their plea. Thus the emperor demanded that his subjects swear an oath to the effect that they would never cease to defend his future wife and “the children born of her” (τὰ ἐκ ταύτης ἐκγονα), “but that they will consider her along with these their Lady and their emperors” (ἀλλὰ κάκεινιν τε μετ’ ἐκείνων βασιλέας ἔχοιεν καὶ δέσποιναν).⁷ After the senate agreed, the emperor disclosed the name of his chosen bride, Euphrosyne, and married her.

If we are to give credence to this account,⁸ Michael expected Euphrosyne to bear him children, who would have been destined for the throne. Considering that she was born shortly after 790,⁹ she must have been 34 years old by the time of her marriage with Michael, an age, if not the most suitable, still very appropriate for conception.¹⁰ But the birth of new male heirs to the throne by a second marriage could only stir up trouble, for Theophilos, Michael’s son by his deceased wife Thekla, was already co-emperor. There were precedents for this. The emperor Herakleios, who had also married twice (and again not without scandal the second time, for the chosen bride was his niece Martina), died in February 641 leaving the empire to both Herakleios Constantine (as Constantine III), his eldest son from his first marriage to Eudokia, and Heraklonas (as Herakleios II), born of his second marriage to Martina, who was to be honoured as empress and mother of the two. The succession was not without problems, for when Constantine III suddenly died in May 641 Martina was suspected of poisoning him in order to favour her own son Heraklonas. An Armenian general, Valentine Arsakidos (Arshakuni) rebelled against Heraklonas and marched with the troops from Asia Minor to Chalkedon forcing a frightened Heraklonas to name Konstans II, son of the late Constantine III, as co-emperor. However, the discontent did not cease and in September of the same year the Byzantine senate deposed Heraklonas, whose nose was slit.¹¹ Did Michael of Amorion have this case in mind when he tried to obtain guarantees from the senate for his second wife and future children? In any case, no new children

⁷ Vat. gr. 167 has ἀλλὰ κάκεινιν τε μετ’ ἐκείνους βασιλέας ἔχοιεν καὶ δέσποιναν. Bekker suggested putting καὶ instead of μετ’, which makes the syntax smoother. However, the sense is clear through Skyl., *Michael II*, 17 (44.87–89).

⁸ Treadgold (1988) 246–7 seems to consider that the Continuator distorted the facts and that the senate acted on its own will when it forced the emperor to remarry. According to Treadgold, the senators “found court society dull without an empress, probably the more so because Thekla had been from a rich Constantinopolitan family whereas Michael was a simple provincial”. For him, “Since ... Michael was a puritan who regretted his first wife and already had an heir, their union, which remained childless, may have been a marriage in name only.”

⁹ *PmbZ* #1705 and *PBE* s.v. “Euphrosyne 1”.

¹⁰ Mich. Syr. 522, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 72 mentions a son of Euphrosyne supposedly killed by her own mother out of fear of seeing him converted to Judaism, the religion Michael apparently fostered. This information is not to be found elsewhere and seems highly suspicious. See *PmbZ* #1705A and *PBE* s.v. “Anonymous 728”.

¹¹ Speck (1988) 425–97 and Treadgold (1997) 307–11.

were born to the emperor from his marriage to Euphrosyne. A male heir, however, was born in the meantime to Theophilos and was baptized as Constantine, probably to honour the name of the father of Theophilos' stepmother, Euphrosyne.¹²

Theophilos may have viewed his father's second marriage with displeasure, although no source reveals any quarrel between father and son over this matter. The question at stake here is whether Michael risked a confrontation with his own son only out of his desire for legitimacy or whether there were other reasons behind his move. As the sources remain silent we can but speculate. However, there is a possibility that with a new marriage Michael wanted to free himself from the "Armenian party" assembled around Theodora's family.¹³ This possibility is worth exploring, although we must first consider briefly the stance of Theophilos towards his stepmother.

6.2 Euphrosyne's Banishment from the Palace and the Return of the "Armenian Party"

We do not know whether Theophilos ever showed any sympathy for his stepmother. Despite the fact that she did not bear any children, he could have eventually felt that she threatened his position as presumptive heir to the throne. In any event, when Michael died in 829, Theophilos was at least 25 years old, but the Logothete says that he ought to have shared the power with Euphrosyne.¹⁴ This remark is followed in the chronicle by the narrative of the bride-show supposedly organized by Euphrosyne for her stepson. As the marriage of Theophilos actually took place much earlier, in 821, when Euphrosyne had not yet married Michael (for Thekla was alive),¹⁵ we must reject this information of the Logothete, who probably made Euphrosyne regent for Theophilos as he thought that otherwise she could not have arranged his marriage with Theodora.¹⁶ The Continuator does

¹² The only literary mention of this son of Theophilos is found in De Cer. 645.21–23, where his sarcophagus is mentioned.

¹³ In fact, Euphrosyne was also of Armenian blood, for her mother Maria of Amnia came from a Paphlagonian family of Armenian descent, well known through the *Life of Philaretos* (see for example Treadgold [1988], note 375). However, she was obviously chosen as wife by Michael not for that reason, but for being the daughter of Constantine VI.

¹⁴ Log. (A), *Michael II* [129] 6 (216.1–2): ἔσχε τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀντ' αὐτοῦ Θεόφιλος, ὁ υἱὸς αὐτοῦ, μετὰ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ Εὐφροσύνη.

¹⁵ See Chapter 3.1 for more details.

¹⁶ There are no coins of Theophilos and Euphrosyne together, but this does not prove anything, for Euphrosyne's supposed regency did not last more than some months. It is interesting to note that the *Life of Theodora* 4 (260.47) mentions Euphrosyne in connection with the bride-show organized for Theophilos (for it seems to consider that Euphrosyne was in fact Theophilos's mother), but has her play no role in the arrangement, only putting her

not mention this regency and correctly makes the reign of Theophilos start in October of 829.¹⁷

The chronicle of the Logothete further mentions that after the marriage Euphrosyne (whom he mistakenly labels as Theophilos' mother) "abandoned voluntarily the Palace to retire to her monastery, named *Ta Gastria*" (ἐκουσίως κατελθοῦσα τοῦ παλατίου ἐν τῇ μονῇ αὐτῆς, ἣ ἐπόνυμον τὰ Γαστρία, ἡσύχαζεν).¹⁸ For Treadgold, this proves that "she had planned all along to retire as soon as she had married off Theophilos".¹⁹

However, the suspicious stress of the Logothete on the "voluntary" (ἐκουσίως) character of the retirement of Euphrosyne²⁰ seems to react against another version of the events, according to which Euphrosyne did not willingly leave the palace. This stress is even more enhanced in the *Life of Theodora*, where the author says that Euphrosyne retired to a monastery "because of her own decision and not under any compulsion, but of her own free and voluntary will" (ἰδίᾳ προαιρέσει καὶ οὐκ ἀνάγκη τινὶ ἐθελουσίῳ δὲ καὶ αὐθαιρέτῳ γνώμῃ).²¹ Are these authors indeed concealing some other version of events? The Continuator once again comes to our aid.

This writer states that the first act of Theophilos' reign²² was the punishment of Leo's murderers (see Chapter 3.3). He says that this act was performed apparently in order to present him as a just emperor, but "in reality to keep himself out of the hands of the conspirers, so that nobody could attempt anything against him".²³ The Continuator qualifies the execution of Leo's murderers as a harsh act performed treacherously, since Theophilos summoned the conspirators against Leo to the Magnaura under a false pretext. Significantly, after relating this episode, the Continuator further says that: "in addition to this Theophilos added another praiseworthy and noble deed" (προσεπιθεὶς τούτοις τὸ ἐπαινετὸν ἐκεῖνό γε καὶ καλόν), namely that "of expelling his mother-in-law and forcing her to return to the monastery in which she had earlier been tonsured as the nun Euphrosyne" (τὸ ἀπελάσαι καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἐν ἣ τὸ πρότερον ἀπεκάρη μονὴν Εὐφροσύνην, τὴν ἑαυτοῦ μητριᾶν, ποιῆσαι παλιννοστήσαι). Some lines follow

maids at the service of the bride already chosen by her son. It seems that the Logothete went a step further and made Euphrosyne responsible for the bride-show.

¹⁷ Th. Cont. III.1 (84.18). According to the *Life of Theodora* 4, Euphrosyne spent ten months in the palace after the celebration of the marriage of Theophilos with Theodora. But nowhere in this *Life* is it stated that during this time Euphrosyne acted as regent.

¹⁸ Log. (A), *Theophilos* [130] 5 (217.20–21).

¹⁹ Treadgold (1979b) 174.

²⁰ Signes Codoñer (1995) 367, note 1.

²¹ *Life of Theodora* 4 (260.4–5).

²² Th. Cont. III.1 (86.5): τὸν σύλλογον ἐκεῖνον τὸν πρῶτον.

²³ Th. Cont. III.1 (85.3–4): τῇ δ' ἀληθείᾳ ἔξωθεν ἑαυτὸν τῶν ἐπιβουλευόντων διατηρῶν, ὡς ἂν μὴ τις κατ' αὐτοῦ τι νεανιεύσῃται.

in which Michael II is again criticized for having illicitly married a nun and demanded of the senate oaths of fidelity to her.²⁴

I formerly considered, developing Treadgold's argument, that the Continuator made this comment out of hate for Euphrosyne, whom he wished in fact to be banished and expelled from the palace. In fact, the Continuator expresses in every possible manner his rejection and contempt for Euphrosyne and the illicit nature of her marriage with Michael, because she had been a nun.²⁵ However, the Continuator also makes Theophilos a target of his criticism all through the book dedicated to his reign, so that he could scarcely have invented the banishment of Euphrosyne from the palace, which so obviously favours the image and prestige of Theophilos as a just emperor. He seems, on the contrary, to be forced to recognize Euphrosyne's banishment by Theophilos as a positive deed. As he could neither fail to mention the fact nor diminish its significance (as he did with the punishment of Leo's murderers by the emperor), he decided to mention it briefly, even in positive terms, but to take the focus away from Theophilos through harsh criticism of Michael for marrying a nun.²⁶

It seems therefore likely that Theophilos expelled Euphrosyne from the palace when his father died and he inherited power. With this act he tried to disentangle himself from his father's controversial marriage and also to make a display of his justice and righteousness (see the Epilogue). It is not by chance that this measure, as the Continuator stresses, was taken along with the punishment of Leo's murderers, who could also have been his father's accomplices. We must not even rule out the possibility that the fear of conspiracy against him, alluded to by the Continuator, was indeed real. With these two measures Theophilos wanted to prevent this threat and, perhaps, to a return to the policy of Michael's first years, when he relied on the "Armenian" party. The "Armenian" marriages of Theophilos' children, as will be shown in Chapter 7, lend credence to this supposition.

But what actually happened to Euphrosyne? She did not simply remain on a remote estate, but significantly was sent back to a monastery, from which she should have never come out in the opinion of many contemporaries. The identification of this monastery poses some problems and also has consequences for our argument. Let us examine this question in some detail.

The Continuator tells us that Euphrosyne was sent to the monastery on the island of Prinkipo, where she had been living as a tonsured nun (between 795 and 824).²⁷ However, we know of the existence of a monastery named *Ta Libadia* (Τὰ Λιβᾶδια) in Constantinople where she was buried and which she probably entered some time after leaving the palace.²⁸ According to *De ceremoniis*, she lay buried there with her parents (Constantine VI and Maria of Amnia), her sister Eirene and

²⁴ Th. Cont. III. 1 (86.11–18).

²⁵ Treadgold (1988) note 376 and Signes Codoñer (1995) 366–7.

²⁶ This digression has been omitted by Skyl., *Theophilos* 2 (50.19–22).

²⁷ Th. Cont. III.1 (86.10) and II.24 (79.6–9).

²⁸ Berger (1988) 646–8. For Euphrosyne see *PmbZ* #1705 and *PBE* s.v. "Euphrosyne 1".

Anna, one of the daughters of Theophilos.²⁹ More problematic, as we have seen, is the indication of the Logothete that Euphrosyne retired to the monastery of *Ta Gastria* (Τὰ Γάστρια). The same information appears in the *Life of Theodora*, which again offers a version very close to that of the Logothete.³⁰ This information must be mistaken, for we know that Theoktiste, Theodora's mother, was actually the founder of this monastery.³¹

This is expressly stated by the Continuator in a further passage, in which Theoktiste is mentioned in connection with the family of Theodora. In this passage, which follows immediately after the crowning of Theodora, the Continuator tells us that Theoktiste was honoured with the dignity of *patrikia zoste* and summoned Theodora's daughters to her house where she gave them gifts as well as advice on icon worship. These details provide the frame for a well-known anecdote: the youngest of the daughters, Pulcheria, found an icon in a box and told her father of her discovery, who became furious and forbade his daughters from visiting their grandmother in the future.³² The author specifies in this context that Theoktiste's house was located "in the place where the monastery of Gastria is now fixed and established – she had bought it from the patrician Niketas".³³ It is a curious coincidence that Pseudo-Symeon repeats the same story as the Continuator, including the discovery of Pulcheria and with very similar wording, but making Euphrosyne, and not Theoktiste, the protagonist. Pseudo-Symeon thus again links the monastery of Gastria to Michael's wife.³⁴ As there are other sources that link the monastery with Theoktiste, it was surely Pseudo-Symeon who committed an error. It makes more sense that the daughters call Theoktiste their grandmother, rather than Euphrosyne.³⁵

But why did Pseudo-Symeon mention Euphrosyne in place of Theoktiste? Either the similarity between the names Εὐφροσύνη and Φλωρίνα (the other name of Theoktiste) or confusion between grandmother and step-grandmother (or even between Theodora's and Theophilos' mothers) may have prompted the error. We cannot know how and where the confusion that linked Euphrosyne with the monastery of Gastria took place, although the *Life of Theodora* seems to be somehow connected with this error. The role of Euphrosyne in the bride-show

²⁹ *De cer.* II.42 (647.10–15): ἰστέον, ὅτι ἐν τῇ μονῇ τῇ λεγομένῃ τῆς Κυρᾶς Εὐφροσύνης ἴσταιται λάρναξ ἀπὸ λίθου Βυθινοῦ, ἐν ᾧ ἀπόκειται Κωνσταντῖνος ὁ υἱὸς Εἰρήνης ὁ τυφλωθεὶς, καὶ Μαρία ἡ γυνὴ αὐτοῦ, καὶ αἱ δύο θυγατέρες αὐτοῦ, Εὐφροσυνὴ ἡ γυνὴ Μιχαὴλ τοῦ Τραβλοῦ, καὶ Εἰρήνη ἡ ἀδελφὴ αὐτῆς, καὶ Ἄννα ἡ θυγάτηρ Θεοφίλου τοῦ βασιλέως.

³⁰ *Life of Theodora* 4 (260.6).

³¹ Th. Cont. III.5 (90.2–5). See Berger (1988) 657.

³² Th. Cont. III.5 (89.22–91.10).

³³ Th. Cont. III.5 (90.3–4): ἐνθα δὴ ἡ τῶν Γαστριῶν μονὴ τὴν πῆξιν ἔχει τὰ νῦν καὶ ἴδρυσιν – ἦν δὲ τοῦτον ἐξ ἐκείνου τοῦ πατρικίου ἐξῶνησαμένη Νικίτα–.

³⁴ Pseudo-Symeon 628–9.

³⁵ In Th. Cont. III.5 (90.17–18) Theoktiste is referred to as "grandmama" (μάμμης). The same name is applied to Euphrosyne in Pseudo-Symeon 629.

for Theophilus, as told in this *Life*, is limited to putting her maids (θεραπεινίδες) at the service of Theodora, who is accordingly served by them “in appropriate and advisable ways” in order to prepare for her wedding.³⁶ The chambermaids of Euphrosyne serving the future empress are appropriate for the staff of a patrikia zoste, whose main duty was precisely to attend to the toilet of the empress and dress her.³⁷ In fact, some details connected with the bride-show can be related to the glamour and protocol of the staff of a patrikia zoste. And then, as Theoktiste, according to the Continuator, was appointed patrikia zoste in connection with the crowning of her daughter, and as, furthermore, this crowning took place at the same time as her wedding, we may suspect that it was Theoktiste who attended her daughter for her wedding (as was to be expected), and not Euphrosyne, who was later to be her stepmother-in-law.

We can therefore rule out Euphrosyne obtaining power or authority after Michael’s death. If this was her intention, Theophilus hindered it, for one of his first acts of government was to expel her from the palace and banish her to a monastery.

When Euphrosyne died, she was buried in the monastery of Libadia along with her parents. It is not by chance that Michael was buried next to his first wife, Thekla, as we read in *De cerimoniis*, and namely in Justinian’s *Heroon*, along with all previous Isaurian emperors (except Constantine VI) and Theophilus.³⁸ It was surely Theophilus who took this step of burying his father and mother side by side, thus signifying his fidelity to Thekla’s memory. This fidelity to Thekla is supported by a comment in Ṭabarī, where it is said that Theophilus trusted the command of an army to “one of his own kinsmen, the son of his maternal uncle” (probably one of Thekla’s brothers).³⁹

The coolness and distance of Theophilus to Euphrosyne is understandable, as his father had chosen her as future empress and mother of emperors. But, beyond the personal quarrels, we must consider the political motivations that led Michael to marry Constantine VI’s daughter. There was of course the legitimacy provided by a scion of the prestigious Isaurian dynasty. Nevertheless, it is also conceivable that after the end of the civil war, Michael felt that he could now free himself from the obligations he had contracted with the “Armenian party” and former supporters of Leo. Until that point Michael, who was related to Leo through his wife Thekla, had allowed many of Leo’s men to hold important offices during his reign (for example in the Eastern themes), for he wanted to stress continuity against Thomas, who could have presented himself as an avenger of Leo in order

³⁶ *Life of Theodora* 3 (260.47–49): αἱ τῆς βασιλίσσης Εὐφροσύνης, τῆς μητρὸς τοῦ βασιλέως, οἰκειότεραι θεραπαινίδες, αἱ σεμνοπρέπως βιοῦσαι, ἀνελάβοντο αὐτὴν καὶ μετὰ τῆς προσηκούσης τιμῆς ὑπηρετοῦν αὐτῇ κοσμίως καὶ εὐτάκτως.

³⁷ Guiland (1971).

³⁸ *De cer.* II.42 (645.17–20).

³⁹ Ṭabarī III.1239, 1243, trans. Bosworth (1991) 102, 106. See *PmbZ* #7259A–B s.v. “Thekla”.

to get more backing for his uprising. Michael even appointed patriarch Antonios Kassymatas, who had been the leader of the iconoclasts in Leo's time. John the Grammarian, mentor to his son Theophilos, probably continued to carry influence at court. Although we cannot know the influence all these persons may have continued to exert in Michael's final years, the fact remains that Manuel remained exiled in the caliphate until Theophilos' accession to power.

The first measures taken by Michael's son as sole emperor, punishing Leo's murderers, expelling Euphrosyne from the palace and calling Manuel back to Constantinople, are most easily understood as the reversal of Michael's policy of gradual detachment from Leo's supporters. The new active iconoclastic fervour of Theophilos also fits in with this change of course, as it corrected the ambiguities and uncertainties of his father.

Chapter 7

The Armenian Family Network

7.1 Theophilos' Armenian Relatives

As we have seen, Theophilos was godson of the Armenian emperor Leo. He was also born of and married to Armenian women (Thekla and Theodora) and had close links with other Armenian relatives of his wife Theodora (Chapter 4.2). Most important, these relatives continued to figure prominently in his reign after his father's death in 829. This was the case with:

- Manuel the Armenian, as we will see in Chapter 8.2;
- Bardas, Theodora's brother, who led an expedition in Abasgia during Theophilos' reign; see Chapter 12.2;¹
- Petronas, another brother of Theodora, who was droungarios of the watch and later charged by the emperor with the delicate mission of executing Theophobos;²
- John the Grammarian, who, as we saw in Chapter 4.3, was godfather to Theodora's children and appointed patriarch towards the end of Theophilos' reign;
- the patrician Constantine Baboutzikos (probably a member of a noble Georgian family and married to Theodora's sister Sophia), who took an active part as droungarios (of the watch?) in the defence of Amorion in 838 (see Chapter 12.2);³

¹ Bardas, kaisar during the minority of Michael III, married a daughter of his to an Armenian called Symbatios (see for him *PmbZ* #7168 and *PBE* s.v. "Symbatios 1"), thus confirming that the Armenian elites favoured marriage among his countrymen.

² Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 10 and 43 (218.51–219.66 and 231.322–4). See *PmbZ* #5929 and *PBE* s.v. "Petronas 5".

³ *PmbZ* #3932 and *PBE* s.v. "Konstantinos 30". Grégoire (1927–1928) 799–802, referring to unpublished research by Peeters, considers the possibility that a letter of the empress Theodora, copied in the *Passio* of the Georgian martyr Constantine (supposedly executed in Baghdad after the raid of the Muslim general Bugha in Tiflis in 853), was originally sent to the relatives of Constantine Baboutzikos after his execution in Sāmarrā in 845. His hypothesis has not been questioned until now. Constantine is called patrician and droungarios in the sources but Treadgold (1988) note 408 said that he must have been droungarios of the watch for "this was the only non-naval drungariate nearly exalted enough to be held by a patrician". If Baboutzikos was then droungarios of the watch in 838, then he was the fourth person to hold this position during Theophilos' reign, along with Petronas, Ooryphas and Constantine Maniakes: see Kühn (1991) 107–8. Since Petronas was

- Theodosios Baboutzikos, who was probably the brother of the above-mentioned Constantine, and was sent as ambassador at least twice during the years 840–842 to Venice and the Frankish court to obtain support against the Muslims and arrange the betrothal of Louis II (Lothair’s eldest son and king of Italy) to one of Theophilos’ daughters (see Chapter 18.2);⁴
- “the son of his maternal uncle”, whom Theophilos, before departing for Anzes to join battle with Afshīn in 838, left in charge of the main Byzantine army on the Halys and executed later for not having been able to cope with the mutiny among the troops;⁵
- the Martinakios who is referred to as a person close to the emperor “through certain kinship” (προσφκειωμένον αὐτῷ πῶς κατὰ συγγένειαν) and was tonsured by Theophilos because of a dubious prophecy which accused his family of claiming the imperial throne.⁶

Probably some of the other Armenians who played a prominent role during his reign had kinship or personal ties with the imperial family. We cannot be sure in most of the cases, but it is perhaps worth considering some of them.

Constantine Maniakes is a good example.⁷ His Armenian origins are expressly stated by Genesios, who records that he “was sent to Theophilos by his relatives and the rulers of his native land as a hostage and ambassador” (ἐξ ἀρχηγῶν καὶ συναυταδέλφων σταλέντα πρὸς βασιλέα Θεόφιλον ἐπικηρυκεύσεως ὄμερον). With the passing of time, the emperor learnt to be fond of him because of his physical strength and noble disposition, and appointed Constantine droungarios of the watch, a post for which Theophilos chose close relatives of his, like his brothers-in-law Petronas and (perhaps) Constantine Baboutzikos. Maniakes later even became logothete of the dromos.⁸ It was probably Constantine who made

deposed, perhaps at the beginning of Theophilos’ reign, Constantine Baboutzikos captured by the Muslims in 838, and Ooryphas is said to have been droungarios of the watch during the rebellion of Theophobos after 838, we should put the appointment of Maniakes as droungarios either before Constantine Baboutzikos or after Ooryphas.

⁴ *PmbZ* #7874. See Shepard (1995) and Chapter 20.1 for the embassies of Baboutzikos in the west.

⁵ Ṭabarī III, 1239 and 1243, trans. Bosworth (1991) 102 and 106.

⁶ Th. Cont. III.27 (121.15–20). This reference is lacking in Gen. III.15 (49.74–86), whose references to the Martinakios family are somewhat vague and perhaps reflect an ambiguous wording of the common source which could have been misunderstood by the Continuator. According to *PBE* s.v. “Anastasios 60” and “Martinakios 1”, the Martinakios mentioned to Theophilos in the prophecy could have been the same as the Anastasios Martinakios who was sent by Leo the Armenian as his special envoy to punish Theodore Stoudites during his exile (see also *PmbZ* #316 and *PBE* s.v. “Anastasios 60”). The Martinakios family came to prominence again through Eudokia, the wife of Basil I, so that we have a prophecy *ex eventu*: see Mango (1973) and Winkelmann (1987) 186–7.

⁷ *PmbZ* #3962 and *PBE* s.v. “Konstantinos 41”.

⁸ Gen. IV.3 (58.2–10).

the Maniakes family prominent in the service of the empire, since it is the first time we hear of it in Byzantium. If Markopoulos is right and the family of the historian Genesisios, a descendant of Constantine Maniakes, had Pontic roots,⁹ then it would be advisable to link the taking of Maniakes as hostage with the campaign Theophilos pursued in the region of Sper in 835, because at this time the emperor, according to Stephen of Taron, “took many prisoners among the Armenian families” (see Chapter 15.1). However, the important issue here is the way the emperor managed to attract members of the Armenian nobility to his innermost circle. The parallel with the case of Theophobos is eloquent. In this case, the Khurramite leader (see Chapter 11), son of a noble Persian, was raised at the imperial palace in Constantinople probably as a privileged hostage, so that in the end he turned out to be one of the men closest to the emperor.

Leo the Philosopher provides us with further evidence of the promotion to high offices of persons closely related to the imperial family.¹⁰ He is twice referred to by the Continuator as a relative (cousin) of the patriarch John the Grammarian.¹¹ This was surely one of the main reasons for his being first awarded a public stipend as a teacher in the Church of the 40 Martyrs in Constantinople by Theophilos¹² and later appointed bishop of Thessalonike by John the Grammarian himself. In the aforementioned passages the Continuator gives as the first reason for Leo’s appointment as bishop his wisdom and learning, in what appears to be the recognition of Leo as a noted scholar under Theophilos. However, it seems unlikely that Theophilos, as stated again by the Continuator, discovered Leo’s talent only when the philosopher handed to the emperor (through the agency of the logothete) the letter the caliph had supposedly sent to him with an offer to come to Baghdad.¹³ The fact that John was Theophilos’ own tutor (see Chapter 4.2) was most probably behind the high position and favour Leo enjoyed during his reign. We do not know how Ma’mūn became acquainted with Leo’s talent, or even whether the story of Leo’s disciple who revealed his master’s wisdom to the caliph reflects an historical event.¹⁴ But it appears likely that as early as 831 Leo was developing for Theophilos an alarm system announcing the Muslim inroads and alerting him when they set off from the fortress of Loulon (see Chapter 14.4).

⁹ Markopoulos (2009).

¹⁰ See *PmbZ* #4440 and *PBE* s.v. “Leo 19” for an appraisal of the sources relating to Leo. His post as director of the Magnaura school under Theophilos, advanced by the Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 35 (228.255–261), is to be dated to the reign of Michael III.

¹¹ Th. Cont. IV.26 (185.10–11): Λέων ἐκεῖνος ὁ μέγας τε καὶ φιλόσοφος, ὃς κατὰ συγγένειαν μὲν τοῦ ἐξαδέλφου τῷ πατριάρχῃ Ἰαννῆ ῥέκλειστο; Th. Cont. IV.27 (191.2–3): ὡς οικειούμενον τούτῳ κατὰ συγγένειαν.

¹² Th. Cont. IV.27 (189.16–18): καὶ πλουτίζεται καὶ ἐν τῷ τῶν ἁγίων μ’ ναῶ διδάσκειν δημοσίᾳ παρὰ τοῦ βασιλέως ἐπιέγεται.

¹³ Th. Cont. IV.27 (189.11–12): αὕτη ἡ αἰτία τῆς τοῦδε τοῦ ἀνδρὸς πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα γνώσεώς τε καὶ οικειώσεως.

¹⁴ Lemerle (1971) 150–54, Speck (1974a) 2–5, Signes Codoñer (1996) and Magdelino (1998a) 199–202.

Theophilos had no need of a caliph to discover Leo's capacities, although the story is a good reflection of a certain cultural rivalry between the caliphate and Byzantium, as we shall see in Chapters 23 and 24. In any case, Leo was closely connected through John the Grammarian to the imperial family, whatever his ethnic origins may have been.

Of a more hypothetical nature is the kinship of Theophilos with the person of the spatharokandidatos Petronas Kamateros, sent as ambassador to the Khazars by Theophilos and later appointed strategos of Cherson (see Chapter 19.1).¹⁵ Nothing certain is known about the origins of Petronas, but the similarity of Petronas' name to that of Theodora's brother has led to suggestions that they were the same person. This is probably to be excluded, for our Petronas was a member of the Kamateroi, but perhaps some kind of kinship or relation did indeed exist between Petronas Kamateros and the imperial family. The sources report that for his mission Petronas was accompanied by ships of the imperial army but also of the (maritime) katepano of Paphlagonia, the region from which the family of Theodora came. The presence of the fleet of Paphlagonia, anchored at Amastris¹⁶ on a mission to the north of the Black Sea, was of course self-evident, for regular connections between Amastris and Cherson should be assumed.¹⁷ These connections could have been precisely the reason for the interest of the Paphlagonians in tightening ties with their northern neighbours. The election of Petronas Kamateros for a mission in Khazaria could thus have been related to his Paphlagonian origins. Again, we must remember here that the empress Theodora probably belonged to a rich family of merchant sailors. As we have seen, the Continuator reports that Theophilos was furious when he discovered that his wife was the owner of a large cargo ship.¹⁸ The possibility that the empress' ship carried cargo from Cherson to Constantinople is appealing and can be used as complementary grounds for explaining the interest of the emperor in controlling the northern coast of the Black Sea through an alliance with the Khazars.

It is however the marriage of one of the daughters of Theophilos to the Armenian Alexios Mousele which constitutes the most compelling evidence of the importance of the "Armenian party" under Theophilos, for it makes it clear that the emperor not only promoted the relatives of his wife, but also fostered further links with noble Armenian houses. This is not the place to deal extensively with Alexios' life, but perhaps some debated aspects of his career can be commented upon, for they will shed some light on the family network we are considering here.

¹⁵ *PmbZ* #5927 and *PBE* s.v. "Petronas 7".

¹⁶ Oikonomides (1972) 349.

¹⁷ See Chapter 20.1 for regular connections between Crimea and Paphlagonia (Sinope and Amastris).

¹⁸ *Th. Cont.* III.4 (88.4–89.14). See Chapter 4.2 and the Epilogue.

7.2 Kaisar Alexios Mousele: His Career and Imperial Ambitions

Alexios was not a secondary figure, for he was appointed kaisar and therefore probable successor of Theophilos at a time when the emperor had no male heirs to the throne. However, except for the Continuator, we have at our disposal few sources about his life, so that even the chronology of his *cursus honorum* and the dating of his marriage to Theophilos' daughter Maria is anything but clear.¹⁹ But before entering into any discussion of Alexios' career, it is worth reproducing here the Continuator's words:

It also behoved him [Theophilos] to take thought for his own affairs and his family and to make provision as he deemed fitting. Therefore, because he was then the father of five daughters, and appeared destitute of male offspring, he thought it necessary to marry Maria, the very last of all – she being preferred to the others – to a man. This man was descended from the race of the Krenitai, from a place in the land of the Armenians; his name was Alexios, with the surname Mousele. He was fair of form, in the prime of age, and he lived in the area of the acropolis in the so-called houses of the Krenitissa. At first, because of the other's affection for his daughter, Theophilos honoured him with the office of patrician and proconsul; and then he proclaimed him magister and, finally, kaisar; and giving him ample troops he dispatched him to Lagobardia, for there was then an urgent necessity. And thus he went off, accomplishing his task well and as was fitting to the emperor. For this reason the emperor's fondness for him abounded, but together with this abounded also men's envy of him, and some of them reviled and uttered slanders against him: that he covets the empire and that one day the Alpha must gain dominion over the Theta. Therefore, when the kaisar Alexios learnt of the false accusations stitched together against him, as if taking precaution against envy, he many times besought the emperor to have mercy on him and allow him to take up the monastic life. But at the time Theophilos would not allow this, citing as a reason the widowhood of his daughter, and thus the aforementioned kaisar continued with full calm his activity in public affairs. However, after Theophilos begat Michael, and his daughter, the kaisar's wife, left this life, he so honoured her as to place her remains in a coffer covered with silver and to grant, through iambics chiselled upon it, the privilege of asylum to persons who sought refuge there, whatsoever the crimes they stood convicted of; and as for Alexios, who had secretly changed estate and clothed himself in the monastic habit, Theophilos, being unable to convince him to take it off again, grudgingly agreed, heaping many reproaches on the other because he chose not to be with him, but in some hole and corner. Whereupon he gave him as a gift the imperial monastery in Chrysopolis, as well as that of Byrseus and also that in Elaia. But the other, whilst living in the monastery in Chrysopolis, once wanted a walk and came to the place called Anthemios, then a part of the imperial

¹⁹ *PmbZ* #195 and *PBE* s.v. "Alexios 2".

Mangana, and said: “Each of these holy places bears the eternal name of its founders”; and he chose to purchase this place through imperial decree and to construct his own monastery. This was done by order of the empress Theodora, his mother in law. Whereupon, having built it up very well and brought it to monastic regulation, he left this life and was buried there, his tomb and inscribed image above it being witness of what we have recounted. Moreover, near him is also buried his brother Theodosios who was enrolled in the ranks of the patricians and who left many marks of his most excellent life in the monastery.²⁰

The first thing to be noted in this passage is the remark of the Continuator near the end of his account that Alexios’ “tomb and the inscribed image of him above it” (τὸν τάφον καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ ἄνωθεν ἐπιγεγραμμένην εἰκόνα) bear witness of what the historian has recounted. Although the wording is ambiguous, the text seems to suggest that the Continuator obtained his information about the person from some kind of inscription on Alexios’ tomb. If this interpretation is correct, the reliability of the account, which is lacking in other histories of the period, would be very high.²¹ However, other sources have preserved additional details, which are not so favourable toward Alexios. Among them we will make particular reference to the version of the Logothete.²²

One thing appears clear in all the accounts: Alexios’ Armenian origins. All the sources unanimously say that he was Armenian by birth and connect him with the Mousele family (Μωσηλέ, Μουσελέ). He was probably related to another Alexios Mousele, who was *droungarios* of the watch and *strategos* of the Armeniakoi in 790–792, and was involved in the confrontation between Eirene and Constantine VI.²³

The Continuator further specifies that “this man was descended from the lineage of the Krenitai, from a place of the (land of) the Armenians” (ὁ δ’ ἀνὴρ τῆς τῶν Κρηνιτῶν κατήγετο γενεᾶς, χώρας τῆς τῶν Ἀρμενίων) and adds that at the time “he lived in the area of the acropolis in the so-called houses of the Krenitissa” (οἰκῶν κατὰ τὸ τῆς ἀκροπόλεως μέρος, κατὰ τὰς οὕτω καλουμένας τῆς Κρηνιτίσσης οἰκίας).²⁴ This has been sometimes understood as if the name of the Krenitissa house in Constantinople, deriving from a nearby fountain or κρήνη, had been transferred to the family occupying it.²⁵ However, the morphology of the name Krenitissa (Κρηνιτίσσα) points rather to the name of a female member of the family of the Krenitai. Curiously enough, we have no other references in the sources about the Krenitai, whereas the family name Mousele is well attested. Moreover, it appears strange that the kaiser Mousele received two family names, the first (Mousele) being

²⁰ Th. Cont. III.18 (107.14–109.16).

²¹ Signes Codoñer (1995) 457–9.

²² Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 11–14 (219.66–220.103).

²³ *PmbZ* #193 and *PBE* s.v. “Alexios I”.

²⁴ Th. Cont. III.18 (107.19–108.1).

²⁵ Moritz (1896–1898) vol. 2, 38. See Signes Codoñer (1995) 451.

his “surname” (ἐπωνυμία) and the second (Krenites) his “lineage” (γενεά). Might it be that Alexios’ “lineage” actually referred to his native country as a place name? The Continuator refers in fact to the “lineage of the Krenitai” as coming “from a place of the (land of) the Armenians”.

It is therefore appealing to connect the Krenitai with the Armenian city of Karin, renamed Theodosiopolis in 415 by the Byzantines (today Erzurum). The district around it was named Karēnitis (Καρηνίτις) by classical authors.²⁶ Constantine V briefly recovered the city for the empire in 754 and settled its inhabitants in the Balkans. The report of the Armenian historian Ghewond is as follows:

During his [Manšūr’s] reign, the king of the Greeks [Constantine V] moved from his imperial portals with a massive multitude of followers and arrived at the city called Theodosiopolis in the region of Karin. As King Constantine, son of Leo, instantaneously destroyed the fortress walls of the castle, he opened the house of the treasury and took away gold and silver of much quantity. Among those treasures he found a fragment of the Lord’s cross, which he took and carried away with him. Furthermore, he took the city troops and the local Saracens, along with their families, to the land of the Greeks. Many of the inhabitants of the same district asked the king to allow them to follow him, in order to be relieved of the heavy yoke of servitude to the Arabs. Having secured permission [from emperor Constantine] they [the inhabitants of the district] prepared themselves, packed their belongings and moved, placing their trust in the power of the Lord’s cross and in the glory of the emperor. They separated themselves [from their own people], left their homeland, and went to the country of the pious king. But the following year Yazīd [Ibn Usayd] prepared the troops, which were under his command, reached the city of Karin and imposed a poll tax throughout the country. He also assembled the innumerable multitude and assigned foremen for the construction work of the ruptured walls of the city, and he himself took care of it. He later allowed the Arabs to migrate to the city and live there with their families for the purpose of protecting the city from the enemies. He also made arrangements for food to be distributed to them from our land of Armenia.²⁷

It is of course just a possibility that the Armenian lineage of the Krenitai derived precisely from some noble families of Karēnitis settled in Byzantium in the second half of the eighth century, the time when the first Mousele appears in our sources. Obviously, both names, Krenitai and Karēnitis, are similar enough as to make their identity likely. But we must also take into account the campaign of

²⁶ Strabo 11.14.5. See *RE* s.v. Καρηνίτις and Talbert (2000) map 89 and vol. 2, 1275.

²⁷ Ghewond 29 (123–4). I make some corrections in the translation of Arzoumanian following Bedrosian. See Arzoumanian (1982) 181 and 183–4 for some short notes on the passage. Other sources, including Theoph. 427 (AM 6243) and 429 (AM 6247), speak rather of deportation of the Armenians by Constantine V, who settled them in Thrace; see Ditten (1993) 76–7, 183–90.

Theophilos against Theodosiopolis/Karin in 835, as we shall see in Chapter 15. We simply do not know the motives that pushed Theophilos to march so deep into the east for the first time since Constantine V's reign, but it is easy to imagine that the Armenian inhabitants of the Karēnitis, who settled in the empire after 754 and remained faithful and loyal servants of the empire, had not forgotten their native homeland. If our Alexios Mousele were one of them, he surely would have taken part in the campaign, a successful one, for Theophilos forced the inhabitants of Theodosiopolis/Karin to pay tribute to the empire. That Alexios Mousele had a great influence at the emperor's court is in any case not to be doubted, for there were even rumours accusing him of claiming the throne, rumours that finally forced his retirement from the palace and his entrance into a monastery.²⁸

However, as we shall now see, it is likely that Alexios was not appointed kaisar until 837–838, so that it would not have been him in person but the supporting “Armenian party” at the court who somehow dictated the targets of Theophilos' campaign in Armenia in 835 and was, accordingly, behind the promotion of Mousele to the highest magistracy of the empire after the emperor himself, that of the kaisar.

To establish a chronology for Alexios' marriage and subsequent career we must again take into account the information provided by the Continuator. As we see, Alexios married Maria, who appears to have been the youngest of the emperor's five daughters, since she is referred to by the Continuator as being “the very last of all the other” (τὴν πασῶν ἐσχάτην ... οὗσαν τῶν ἄλλων) daughters of Theophilos.²⁹ This information seems to be confirmed by the Continuator in another passage, where Maria is listed in last place after the other four daughters of Theophilos: Thekla, Anna, Anastasia, Pulcheria and Maria.³⁰ There are also other sources confirming that Thekla was the oldest of the daughters,³¹ and coins have been preserved with Theophilos, his wife Theodora and Thekla on the obverse and Anna and Anastasia on the reverse,³² confirming thus that Anna and Anastasia were younger than Thekla. Against all this evidence, it has occasionally been argued that Maria was in fact the eldest daughter of Theophilos, but that her untimely death (before the aforementioned coins with her sisters were struck) made her age and position among her sisters unknown in later times, so that she was mistakenly placed at the last of the daughters' list and considered to be the youngest of all them.³³ However, the evidence appears to be overwhelmingly in favour of Maria being the youngest of the daughters and there is no compelling reason to doubt this.

²⁸ Th. Cont. III.18 (108.6–13).

²⁹ Th. Cont. III.18 (107.17).

³⁰ Th. Cont. III.5 (90.5–7): πέντε δὲ ἦσαν τὸν ἀριθμὸν, ἧ τε Θέκλα καὶ Ἄννα, Ἀναστασία τε καὶ Πουλχερία καὶ ἡ Μαρία.

³¹ *PmbZ* #7261 and *PBE* s.v. “Thekla 1”.

³² Grierson (1973) 415–16.

³³ See Brooks (1901), Bury (1912) 465–8 and Signes Codoñer (1995) 380–84. Pulcheria is presented in Th. Cont. III.5 (90.20–21) as an infant child (καὶ ἡλικία πρὸς

to marry Maria ... to a man” (Μαρίαν ... ὤήθη δεῖν συζεῦξαι ἀνδρὶ).⁴⁰ Moreover, when the emperor began bestowing titles upon Alexios, he is said to have acted just “because of the other’s [Alexios’] affection for his daughter” (διὰ τὸ πρὸς τὴν θυγατέρα τούτου φιλόστοργον),⁴¹ but no specific mention of an existing marriage is made. It is only when, already being kaisar, Alexios makes as if to enter a monastery, that the Continuator says that the emperor did not accept it, alleging “the widowhood of his daughter” (τὴν χηρείαν τῆς θυγατρὸς),⁴² thus presupposing that she was already Alexios’ wife. In fact, when Maria finally dies, she is referred to as “the wife of the kaisar” (τοῦ καίσαρος δὲ γαμετῆ).⁴³ It is perhaps suggestive to think that Alexios was first betrothed to Maria when she was 7 years of age, in 832–833.⁴⁴ According to this supposition, Alexios could have started his career as early as 832–833 after his betrothal to Maria, but was only appointed kaisar some years later, in 837–838, with the expedition to Sicily in view.⁴⁵ This means that Alexios could not have taken part as kaisar in the first triumph of Theophilos in 831. This triumph is certainly the one described in a protocol preserved in *De cerimoniis*, where the emperor is welcomed by a kaisar when returning to the capital after a campaign (see also Chapter 14.2).

We know that Theophilos had a second triumph in 837 after a victorious campaign in Sozopetra and the Fourth Armenia. This is perhaps the triumph alluded to in a note copied at the end of the protocol of the 831 triumph. There it is said that a second triumph (again undated) of this emperor took place later, at which the same procedures were followed, except for a welcome given to the emperor by children carrying flowers when he was to enter the city.⁴⁶ This might also mean that a kaisar took part in this second triumph. But was Alexios this unnamed kaisar?

We do not know when Alexios was sent to Italy, although 838 is a likely date.⁴⁷ Theoretically, he could have been present in Constantinople in 837 to take part in the triumph as kaisar when the emperor returned from his campaign in the east. As we shall see in Chapter 11.3, Theophobos is a very likely candidate for the kaisar

⁴⁰ Th. Cont. III.18 (107.18–19). Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 11 (219.67–68) says that Theophilos “made him his son-in-law” (εἰσεποιήσατο γαμβρόν), but as we have seen his account is briefer than that of the Continuator and, therefore, more imprecise in the details.

⁴¹ Th. Cont. III.18 (108.2).

⁴² Th. Cont. III.18 (108.14).

⁴³ Th. Cont. III.18 (108.17).

⁴⁴ I argued in this sense in Signes Codoñer (1995) 454–5, albeit supposing that Theophilos married only in 830.

⁴⁵ Ignatios, *Life of Gregory Dekapolites* §52 mentions the presence of a kaisar in Chrysopolis (modern Kavala) at the Via Egnatia at an indeterminate time. It is supposed that he was fighting the Bulgarians, not on the way to Sicily. But it is difficult to form any firm conclusions on this evidence. See Makris (1997) 115.

⁴⁶ *Constantine VII, Three treatises* 150.880–884.

⁴⁷ This is the date of a Sicilian campaign by Byzantine troops mentioned in Arab sources. See Signes Codoñer (1995) 453–4.

mentioned in 831. But it is to be doubted that he continued to enjoy this title in 837, for in the meantime he had been appointed ruler over the Persians in the eastern Caucasus and Azerbaijan, as we also consider in Chapter 11.4. If Theophobos had retained the title of *kaisar* until 838, when he fell into disgrace after the battle of Anzes, and Alexios was already appointed *kaisar* in 837, then we would have had two *kaisares* for the years 837–838. This is by no means impossible (consider the two sons of Constantine V we will mention below), although we ought then to conclude that either the second triumph of Theophilos recorded in the protocol was not that of 837, but a previous one (see Chapter 16), or that only one of the two *kaisares* took part in it. This latter possibility suggests we consider that Alexios Mousele was sent to Sicily in 837 immediately after being appointed *kaisar* as a consequence of his marriage to his legal bride Maria.

There are further reasons to exclude the appointment of Alexios as *kaisar* before 831. According to the Continuator, the emperor decided to marry his daughter to Alexios because, since “he was then the father of five daughters, and *appeared destitute of male offspring*, he thought it necessary to marry Maria, the very last of all – she being preferred to the others – to a man”.⁴⁸ If this information is true, Theophilos would have given up hope of having a male heir when he married Alexios to his favourite daughter in 837–838. This is presumably connected with the premature death of his heir Constantine, which took place in the first years of Theophilos’ reign and is most probably to be dated in the first half of 831. Moreover, if Constantine died even later, for instance in 835, as assumed by some scholars, this would confirm our thesis that Alexios could not have been appointed *kaisar* at the beginning of Theophilos’ reign.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Th. Cont. III.18 (107.15–19): ἐπει πέντε μὲν ἔτυχε τηνικαῦτα θυγατέρων ὑπάρχειν πατῆρ, ἔρημος δὲ ἀρρενικῆς ὄρᾳτο γονῆς, τὴν πασῶν ἐσχάτην Μαρίαν ἡγαπημένην οὖσαν τῶν ἄλλων ᾗθηθαι δεῖν συζεῦσαι ἀνδρὶ.

⁴⁹ Constantine, Theophilos’ son and co-emperor, appears on some coins with his father, but dating of the issues is controversial; see Grierson (1973) 406–51, Treadgold (1975), Füeg (2007) 25–8, 71–3 and Lightfoot (2011). Füeg and Lightfoot have shown that the coins that represent Theophilos with his son Constantine are more numerous than hitherto assumed and thus stand as a direct challenge to Grierson’s assumption that Constantine’s reign could have lasted only a few weeks. However, whereas Lightfoot follows Treadgold and dates the coronation of Constantine to 833 and his death to 835, Füeg follows Grierson and still defends an early dating of both events, c. 830–831. If we accept the dating of Grierson and Füeg, Constantine would have been dead in September 831 as he does not appear next to his father Theophilos on the seals of the *komerkiarioi* struck in the years 6340 and 6341 of the Byzantine era. See Zacos and Vegler (1972–1985) vol. II, nr. 285 and Oikonomides (1986) 46. If, however, we admit that Constantine was crowned only in 833, we must assume that Theophilos appointed a *kaisar* at the beginning of his reign before his son and presumptive heir was crowned, for Constantine had already been born during the reign of Michael II, as we saw in Chapter 6.1. This appears less probable, especially considering the importance of the *kaisar*’s title, as we will now argue.

Obviously, being appointed *kaisar* did not automatically mean that the person designated was to be the future βασιλεύς, as is made clear by the case of Constantine V, who appointed καίσαρες the elder sons of his third marriage, Christopher and Nikephoros, but reserved the imperial succession for Leo, the son of his first marriage.⁵⁰ However, the title promoted the person to the highest position in the court and the administration, and made of him a most likely candidate for the throne if no male heirs were born to the reigning emperor. For example, the appointment of Bardas as *kaisar* in 862 was justified by Michael's lack of male heirs.⁵¹

At the same time, the appointment of a *kaisar* as co-emperor lay in the sole hands of the reigning emperor, who could therefore abstain from promoting the *kaisar* to βασιλεύς and future heir to the throne and choose instead at any time another person for the office. This is what actually happened with Theophilos, since it was finally his son Michael, and not the two *kaisares*, who was appointed co-emperor in 840. Nevertheless, the *kaisares* could also be a potential danger for the emperor, for although the last word on their future appointment as *basileis* (βασιλεῖς) was left in the emperor's hands, they could easily develop imperial ambitions. Thus Nikephoros (Constantine V's son) plotted against his brother Leo IV as soon as their father died.⁵² As we saw, there were also accusations against Alexios for pretending to the throne. And Theophobos, who was probably the first *kaisar* of Theophilos' reign, was deposed after rebelling against Theophilos (see Chapter 12).

It is against this background that we must consider the reasons Theophilos had for engaging Alexios to the youngest of his daughters, instead of the eldest. This engagement has always puzzled scholars, for if the emperor wanted to assure an alternative to the throne, he would have married Alexios to an elder daughter. Since Theophilos chose Maria as a wife for Alexios perhaps as early as 831, only a betrothal was possible between them and Alexios had to wait until 837–838 for a canonical marriage with a 12-year-old wife. Maria being so young, she could have died in childbirth soon after the wedding. This was by no means unpredictable and makes the decision of Theophilos even more questionable. Considering the mortality rate at the time, it would have been more advisable to arrange a marriage to an elder daughter. Why did Theophilos choose the youngest instead?

The sources seem to imply that Theophilos chose Maria as wife for Alexios because she was the most beloved of his daughters.⁵³ This alone appears as an unsatisfactory explanation for the events. However, one must take into consideration that, for reasons of which we are ignorant, none of the other daughters of Theophilos married; instead they all entered into a monastery with

⁵⁰ *PmbZ* # 1101 and 5267 and *PBE* s.vv. “Christopheros 1” and “Nikephoros 5”. *PBE* s.v. “Anastasios 23” suggests that the adoptive son of the usurper Thomas was appointed *kaisar*, but this is just a guess not supported by any statement in the sources. See also *PmbZ* #317.

⁵¹ *PmbZ* #791 and *PBE* s.v. “Bardas 5”.

⁵² Theophanes 450–51.

⁵³ Th. Cont. III.18 (107.18) and Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 11 (219.68).

their mother when Theodora was banished from the palace during the reign of her son Michael III.⁵⁴

It has also been suggested that Theophilos arranged for Maria to be betrothed to the future kaisar, despite her being a child, for he wanted to avoid the couple gaining prominence too early.⁵⁵ This again does not make sense if we think that Theophilos relied on them as the only option for the succession if no further male heir was born to him. He had no need to waste time in such a way – unless, of course, another option was already available to him. This makes it likely that the kaisar appointed by him in 831 represented for him the first option. If Theophobos was this kaisar, as we will argue in Chapter 11.3, this has consequences for understanding the career of Alexios during Theophilos' reign and the influence of the "Armenian party" at the court.

The marriage of Theophobos to the emperor's sister was probably expected from the very beginning to produce children, for the sister was not a child like her niece Maria. If Thekla, the eldest of Theophilos' daughters, was born in 822, she could not have reached the canonical age for marriage until 834, so that Theophilos did not have any other option in 831 than to marry his sister to the kaisar-to-be in order to assure the succession to the throne.⁵⁶ The candidate chosen is therefore revealing, for the Persian Theophobos did not belong to the "Armenian party" and his election as husband of Theophilos' sister and appointment as kaisar could only have been intended to balance the excessive influence the Armenians had at court. To assuage the "Armenian party", Theophilos could always argue that his daughters were not yet old enough for marriage. For this same reason, he could even have arranged at the same time the betrothal of his youngest daughter to a leading figure among the Armenians, such as Alexios Mousele. But this may have been for him just a second option.

It remains for us to consider whether the impending danger that made the emperor hurry back to Constantinople in 838, shortly after the battle of Anzes, was related to the accusations of conspiracy that the Sicilians made against Alexios Mousele. Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus mention that after the battle of Anzes an envoy came to the emperor from his mother in Constantinople announcing that rumours had reached the city that he was dead and that "some nobles wanted to appoint a new emperor". Theophilos left Amorion when the city was preparing to resist the assault of the armies of the caliph, and returned to Constantinople, where he executed "the nobles who wanted to proclaim another emperor".⁵⁷ Treadgold connected these events with a remark preserved in the Continuator and Genesios about the execution of some conspirators against Theophilos as a result

⁵⁴ *PmbZ* #7261.

⁵⁵ *PmbZ* #4735. See also *PBE* s.v. "Maria 4".

⁵⁶ I thank Prof. Otto Kresten for his valuable comments on this subject.

⁵⁷ Michael the Syrian 535–6, trans. Chabot (1905) vol. 3, 95 and Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography* 149, trans. Budge (1932) vol. 1, 136.

of the prophecies uttered by a ventriloquist sorceress.⁵⁸ None of the conspirators mentioned in this passage seems to be connected with Alexios Mousele, who was at the time probably far away in Sicily, as Treadgold remarks. However, it is not to be excluded that Alexios Mousele was considered a convenient candidate for the throne in some aristocratic circles of Constantinople when the rumour of Theophilos' death reached the capital. These circles were perhaps afraid of the growing influence of Theophobos, who was proclaimed emperor by the Persian troops at the same time, following the disaster at Anzes, as we shall see in Chapter 12. If the Sicilian envoys who, according to the Logothete, accused Mousele of conspiracy,⁵⁹ arrived at the court during the summer of 838, then they could have unexpectedly backed the candidacy of the emperor's son-in-law to the imperial throne, and this without the kaisar himself having heard of the recent defeat of the imperial army in Anatolia. This would explain the furious reaction of the emperor against his son-in-law, whom he ordered to return immediately to Constantinople and kept in prison for some time despite the securities he had given him through the agency of the bishop Theodore Krithinos. This explains as well the repentance of the emperor and his pardon, after he was able to establish Alexios' innocence.

In any case, it appears certain that whether the usurpation Theophilos faced in Constantinople in 838 had anything to do with Alexios Mousele or not, it was not Theophobos whom some circles in Constantinople wanted to proclaim βασιλεύς when they heard of the defeat of the emperor at Anzes. On the contrary, the fact that Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus speak of "nobles" when referring to the conspirators executed by Theophilos upon his arrival in the capital makes it evident that they rallied the support of the conservative families against the "barbarians" backed by the Amorian emperor. That Theophobos rebelled at the same time could not have been just a coincidence, but a sign of the division prevailing in the empire between these two groups. In Chapter 8 we will consider additional evidence for the opposition of the aristocratic families of the empire to the "barbarians" (Armenians and Persians) supporting Theophilos.

⁵⁸ Th. Cont. III.27 (121.10–122.15) and Gen. III.15 (49.74–50.12). See Treadgold (1988) 301 and note 411 and Signes Codoñer (1995) 92–3 and 539–41.

⁵⁹ Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 11 (219.71–73): Σικελοί τινες ἀνελθόντες διέβαλον τοῦτον τῷ βασιλεῖ, ὡς τὰ μὲν τῶν Χριστιανῶν τοῖς Ἀγαρηνοῖς προδίδωσι, κατὰ δὲ τῆς βασιλείας σου μελετᾷ.

Chapter 8

Opposition to the Emperor

8.1 Checking Aristocratic Resistance

We do not find any mention of relatives of Michael II during Theophilos' reign. This is perhaps evidence not of Theophilos' sympathies for the relatives of his wife, but rather of the humble origins of Michael's family. It was probably not just that Michael's relatives were unfit for assuming responsibilities in government, but that they could not afford the necessary support and connections Theophilos needed for ruling and preserving his power. The Amorian emperor was, exactly as his father, a *homo novus*, surely regarded with diffidence among the aristocratic families of the capital. The Armenian family of Theodora provided him with some loyal servants whom the emperor could trust for delicate missions and for establishing a power base in the administration of the capital. Vassiliki Vlyssidou suggests that Theophilos faced real opposition from the aristocratic families of the empire,¹ so that he understandably tried to secure allies among the high officials of the state by promoting close relatives to these posts. The widespread connections of Theodora's family clan were therefore a reliable basis for his power. Theophilos' marriage to Theodora was probably a calculated political move by his father, whose intentions we can trace through its consequences.

Curiously enough, it seems that Theophilos disregarded the clear iconophile stance of most of the members of Theodora's family, who continued to hold high positions in the state after his death and turned into devoted defenders of images – persons like Bardas, Petronas or even her uncle Manuel who, according to some sources, lived well into the reign of Michael III,² not to speak of Theodora proper or of the future patriarch Photios, the champions of icon worship.³

Apparently, as Hans-Georg Thümmel suggests, the significance of the conflict about images was secondary for the ruling elite and even for the hierarchy of the Church, which explains the ease with which the bishops changed sides after

¹ Vlyssidou (2001).

² Signes Codoñer (2013a) for a new reflection on this question with previous bibliography.

³ For the kinship between Theodora's sister Kalomaria and Photios see Th. Cont. IV.22 (175.3–12). For comments on this passage (which presents a textual problem and has been amended *silente* by the editors according to the wording of Skylitzes) and also for a discussion of the life of Photios during Theophilos' reign, see Bury (1890), Ahrweiler (1965), Mango (1977), Nogara (1978), Treadgold (2002), Settapani (2006) 167–81 and Signes Codoñer and Andrés Santos (2007) 3–11.

the synods of 754, 787, 815 and 843. Thümmel considers political and economic necessities to be more of a determinant for rulers and argued that it was only under Photios that theology made the veneration of icons a permanent and central issue of orthodoxy.⁴ It is in this sense that the image of justice promoted by Theophilos is to be understood, as Vlyssidou has already established, as an essential part of the political message of an emperor who was fighting for a political program based on the reinforcement of the state against the centrifugal forces of the Byzantine aristocracy.⁵ This image of a just emperor, which we will consider in the Epilogue, survived the emperor's death and rivalled the blackened characterization of Theophilos as a furious iconoclast promoted by the iconophile (official) hagiography after 843.

That the emperor punished when necessary his close relatives (see again the Epilogue) is further evidence, however, that the basis provided by Theodora's family was clearly insufficient to assure his power base. To rally supporters around him, Theophilos was probably obliged to share power with other groups, who eventually followed his political program.

The appointment of eunuchs to key positions in the administration, persons such as the logothete of the dromos Theoktistos⁶ or the strategos of the Boukellaroi Theodore Krateros,⁷ was surely used by Theophilos as a further way to balance the power of the aristocratic families, exactly as Eirene had done some thirty years before by appointing eunuchs such as Aetios⁸ and Staurakios.⁹

Moreover, as we shall see in Chapters 10.2 and 11.4, the emperor seems to have promoted the integration of Khurramite fighters into the Byzantine army and even fostered the marriages of Persian men to Greek women in order to create a loyal contingent of troops upon which he could rely under any circumstance. His bid for the Persians and the appointment of Theophobos as their exousiastes was surely unwelcome in many traditional circles, which spread the image of a philobarbarian (ἑθνόφιλος, φιλοεθνῆς) emperor and thus appealed to the patriotic sentiments of part of the population.¹⁰

⁴ See Thümmel (1991) 37–9, who presents a balance of his previous analysis of the conflict. Among other things, Thümmel writes: “Die Benennung der Periode nach dem hervorstehenden Ereignis täuscht über dessen relativ geringe Bedeutung für das Staatswesen hinweg. Die politischen und wirtschaftlichen Zwänge waren insgesamt stärker. Nicht einmal die Theologie ist eindeutig durch den Bilderstreit geprägt worden.” See also Mango (1977).

⁵ See for example Vlyssidou (2001) 447: “Le rang social élevé de ceux qui agissaient contre les lois et les graves peines qui leur ont été imposées ne doivent être attribuées uniquement à la volonté de Théophile de rendre justice, mais aussi à sa lutte pour s'imposer à une classe supérieure, habituée à se comporter d'une façon arbitraire, sans se soucier de l'existence des lois impériales, aussi bien que de l'empereur en personne.”

⁶ *PmbZ* #8050 and *PBE* s.v. “Theoktistos 3”.

⁷ *PmbZ* #7679 and *PBE* s.v. “Theodoros 67”.

⁸ *PmbZ* #106 and *PBE* s.v. “Aetios 1”.

⁹ *PmbZ* #6880 and *PBE* s.v. “Staurakios 1”.

¹⁰ *Life of Methodios* 1249D and *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 27.5. See Vlyssidou (2001).

Finally, if Jonathan Shepard is right, Theophilos could even have thought of contacting Viking mercenaries to fight the Muslims in Africa.¹¹

We do not know, however, how far the emperor went in his attempt to remove aristocratic families from power either in Constantinople or in the provinces, for we have no information about the family background of most of the protagonists of his reign, such as the patrician Aetios who was strategos of the Anatolikoi¹² or the droungarios of the watch Ooryphas.¹³

Among the few officials whose noble ascent is expressly mentioned in the sources we find a strategos member of the noble Melissenoi family, whose Armenian ascendancy we considered in Chapter 1.1,¹⁴ or another official named Bassoes, who is referred to as “of illustrious ascendants” (περιφανής ἐκ προγόνων),¹⁵ both defenders of Amorion in 838; or Kallistos, comes of a palatine schola and dux of Koloneia who, according to his biographer Michael the Synkellos, “had illustrious parents” (γονεῖς ἐκέκτητο περιφανείς).¹⁶ Since these figures certainly do not rank among the main protagonists of Theophilos’ reign, we can perhaps conclude that the emperor did not especially choose persons of noble families for the main posts of the administration. It is however questionable whether Theophilos systematically excluded the aristocracy from military commands in Anatolia, as he probably knew well that any radical change could have put the defences of the empire in great danger, as was exactly the case during the invasion of Hārūn al-Rashīd in 782.¹⁷

The results of his policy are difficult to assess in the battlefield, where the participation of these noble commanding officers would perhaps be most sensed. We know for example that the imperial troops mutinied and took flight in 838 as soon as the emperor left them on the Halys to fight the contingents led by Afshīn. But the defendants of Amorion did their best to resist under the most adverse circumstances until the treason of Boiditzes sealed the fate of the city (see Chapter 17.3). Of the other campaigns on the eastern front, most of them victorious, we know almost nothing about the participation and engagement of officials of noble families. Nevertheless, the final dissolution of a specialized unity of Persian troops after 838 (see Chapter 12) must undoubtedly be seen as a victory for the traditionalists and the aristocracy against the “philobarbarian” Theophilos.

A good approach for understanding the stance of some aristocratic milieus towards the policy of the emperor is provided by the *Life* of Kallistos written by Michael Synkellos and transmitted as a version of the *Acta Martyrum*

¹¹ Shepard (1995). See also Chapter 20.

¹² *PmbZ* #108 and *PBE* s.v. “Aetios 2”.

¹³ *PmbZ* #564–6 and *PBE* s.v. “Ooryphas 3”.

¹⁴ *PmbZ* #4952 and 8211. For the Melissenoi see Settipani (2006) 492–505.

¹⁵ *PmbZ* #982. See also Winkelmann (1987) 164.

¹⁶ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 23.15.

¹⁷ Tritle (1977).

Amoriensium, numbered Γ by the editors.¹⁸ As we mentioned above, Kallistos is recorded in the *Life* as having been born of a distinguished family. His father sent him to Constantinople in order to study (τῆς ἐν γράμμασι χάριν παιδεύσεως). When he grew older, “he enlisted in the imperial army” (τῆς καταλόγου γίνεται τῆς ὑπὸ τὸν αὐτοκράτορα στρατείας) “because of his physical strength, his handsome appearance and the good name of his family” (διὰ τε ῥώμην σώματος καὶ κάλλος καὶ συγγενῶν εὐδοκίμησιν). With time he rose to become comes of the *tagma* of the *scholai* (τὴν τοῦ κόμητος ἀξίαν ἐν τῷ τάγματι τῶν φιλοχρίστων ἐπέχων σχολῶν).¹⁹ When Kallistos left and returned to the palace because of the obligations attached to his dignity (διὰ τὸ τῆς ἀξίας ἀκόλουθον), he avoided meeting his fellow officers in the street and chatting about trifles, but preferred instead to ride alone on his horse. When the opportunity arose, he sat alone at the place reserved to his dignity (ἐπὶ τοῦ τόπου τῆς ἀξίας αὐτοῦ) and read the Scriptures.²⁰ But when one day he appeared before the emperor with “unwashed hair and neglected beard” (ἀυχηρᾶ τινη κόμη καὶ ἀφιλοκάλῳ γενειάδι), Theophilus reproved him for not respecting his authority (τοῦ κράτους μου καταφρονῶν) with his carelessness (ἀκοσμία) and ordered his hair to be forcibly trimmed.²¹ On another occasion the emperor rebuked him for remaining unmarried, since Kallistos had embraced celibacy.²² Although Kallistos was promoted to the dignity of the imperial protospatharioi (τοῖς οἰκειακοῖς τῶν βασιλικῶν σπαθαρίων ὄντα ἐναρίθμουν), he failed to comply with the orders of the emperor in persecuting the iconophile monks of the Pelekete monastery and was consequently beaten and expelled “from his fratria” (τῆς περὶ αὐτὸν φρατρίας), meaning probably the officers at the imperial palace, for his expulsion from the palace (τῶν ἀνακτόρων ἐξελαύνει) is expressly mentioned later on in the text after a long digression about the piety and sufferings of Kallistos.²³ Then Theophilus “gave him the command of his beloved Ethiopians” (αὐτὸν... καθίστησιν ἄρχοντα τῶν φιλουμένων αὐτῷ Αἰθίοπων).²⁴ The author then makes the following comments:

For this man [Theophilus] was more philobarbarian (φιλοεθνῆς) than any other emperor before and had gathered together the biggest company (πλείστην συμμορίαν) of men of different tongues, whom he ordered under compulsion to marry (ζεύγυσθαι) the daughters of the citizens (πολίτων) and even of the inhabitants of the capital (ἄστυγειτόνων), thus ruining the favourable destiny of the Romans and bringing about a crisis for the Christians. But any account about this must be left out and we must now proceed further with our subject.

¹⁸ For the person see *PmbZ* #3606 and *PBE* s.v. “Kallistos 2”.

¹⁹ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 23.20–24.

²⁰ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 24.1–12.

²¹ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 24.30–25.7.

²² *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 25.7–19.

²³ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 25.20–35 and 27.1–2.

²⁴ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 25.20–35 and 27.2–5.

After thus putting him over the squadron of the Ethiopians (τὸ βάνδον τῶν Αἰθιοπῶν), he [Theophilus] sent him to fight along with the commanders of the people (ἀρχηγῶν τοῦ λαοῦ) who had already arrived for pacifying the land of the *Gethhai* (εἰρηνεῦσαι τὰς τῶν Γεθῶν χώρας). He [Theophilus] expected one of two things: either the righteous was convinced of rising up against him, or, much easier, he was to die badly because of the unruliness of the barbarians (τῆ ἀταξία τοῦ ἔθνους). This last thing seemed to the saint more bearable than the first one, for he preferred the death of the body than being forced to act against the soul by these men of monstrous appearance (τοῖς ἀτόποις θεάμασι). This most pious Kallistos, being thus under the rule of such a mob (ἐν τῇ τοιαύτῃ... δημαγωγία), endured on his way many temptations from those reckless men, who either plundered, beat and carried off the properties of the poor peasants or fell in an enthusiastic frenzy and showed the unlawfulness of the barbarians (τῶν βαρβάρων ... τὰ ἔκθεσμα).²⁵

Although his troops were guilty of such disorders, Kallistos managed to survive and returned safely to the court.²⁶ Then the emperor appointed him dux and sent him to Koloneia.²⁷ Kallistos found that some of the officers of his new posting were Manicheans, but when he tried to convert them, he was handed over to some of their co-religionists, who were living under Arab rule. There he was kept in prison with a few attendants until the caliph heard about him and had him conveyed to Syria, when he joined the other officials captured in Amorion in 838.²⁸ The rest of the text describes how the martyrs were put to death after repeated attempts to convert them to Islam.²⁹

There are some points of interest here. First of all, the “Ethiopians” mentioned in the text may refer to the Khurramite Persians. John Haldon considered the possibility that a military contingent of black people coming from Africa could have been formed at the time, but the only evidence advanced for this unity is a reference to the presence of “black Christians” in the palace in the later ninth century by the Arab prisoner Hārūn ibn Yahyā.³⁰ This parade guard of black people may have existed in the imperial palace at the time, but it has nothing to do with the “Ethiopians” of our text, who are fighting the enemies of the empire far away from the capital. I think, rather, considering the polemical nature of the text, that the name “Ethiopians” is just used for referring to dark-skinned orientals (“men of different tongues”) serving in the imperial army in a special unit, which cannot be but the tourma of the phoideratoi, controlled by the Persians. This racial remark is not to be

²⁵ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 27.5–19.

²⁶ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 27.22–24.

²⁷ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 27.32–28.4.

²⁸ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 29.1–35.

²⁹ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Γ, 30–36.

³⁰ Haldon (1984) 251–2 and note 681. See also Ditten (1993) 328–31 with further bibliography.

overlooked, especially because it is made in a hagiography conceived for a broad audience of readers who probably shared the distance of the author as regards the easterners. Readers of the capital were probably addressed in the first instance, for they are singled out as ἄστυγείτονες among the people affected by the compulsory marriages established by Theophilos with the “barbarians”. This is also a clear allusion to the policy of mixed marriages between Persians and Romans we know from other sources, which do not mention that other “barbarians” were included in these provisions of the emperor.³¹ Therefore the disgust at the “Ethiopians” felt by the pious Kallistos might reflect the wider opposition of the aristocrats, among whom Kallistos belonged, to Theophilos’ policy towards the Persians.

Another point to be stressed is that the Persian contingent was not only active on the eastern frontier, for Kallistos is sent with them to the land of the *Getthai*, that is to say the Bulgarians, who settled in the lower Danube where the ancient Getai came from.³² This important remark, which seems to have been overlooked, confirms that the Persian contingent were not just active on the eastern frontier. They were conceived by the emperor as a general alternative to the “Roman” troops and could eventually be sent off to fight the Bulgarians in the west.

Another interesting aspect of the text is that, despite the opposition of Kallistos to the emperor and despite being beaten for refusing to prosecute the iconophile monks of Pelekete, he continues to hold a position in the army. He is indeed expelled from the imperial palace and sent to the Danube with a “barbarian” squadron, but it is doubtful that his new mission was really a punishment as the hagiographer claims. In fact, Kallistos’ resistance to punishing the monks of Pelekete could easily have been an invention of the hagiographer, who needed some proof of the iconophile faith of the “saint” before he was sent as prisoner to Baghdad along with the other “martyrs of Amorion”. In fact, Kallistos’ purported refusal to comply with the emperor’s orders concerning the monks of Pelekete was witnessed only by the emperor and perhaps by some courtiers. Maybe the reason for the supposed relegation of Kallistos, who was nevertheless later appointed dux of Koloneia, lay more in his aristocratic defiance of some common rules, like the one ordering all officers to have short hair. This rule is expressly mentioned in a comment preserved by the Continuator:

Now because he [Theophilos] had by nature rather little adornment of the head and was stripped of hair, he decreed that this should be shorn everywhere on the skin and that no Roman should be permitted to wear his hair beyond the neck. If anyone was caught doing so, he was to be tortured with many whippings in order to recall him to the virtue of his Roman forebears (πρὸς τὴν τῶν προγόνων Ῥωμαίων); for they prided themselves on keeping their hair in such a way.

³¹ For this policy see Chapter 9.

³² Instead of Γέται the author speaks of Γέτθαι, in a form that is surely contaminated with Γότθοι. This does not change our identification, for by the time they invaded the eastern empire at the end of the fourth century the Gothic lands lay in the Balkans.

Therefore he issued a law that no one should dare in any wise allow his hair to grow beyond the neck.³³

The suggestion that the emperor issued such a rule because he was becoming bald and therefore envious of the long hair of his soldiers is obviously to be discounted. In fact, we find in other sources additional references to regulations of this kind in the army, such as for example in the *Life of Stephen the Younger*, where a courtier sent to Stephen by Constantine V disguised as a monk is unmasked by the saint “because he had shaved himself to the skin following the edict of the tyrant” (ἐσεσίμωτο γὰρ εἶσω τῆς τοῦ προσώπου δορᾶς κατὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ τοῦ τυράννου διαταγὴν).³⁴ The existence of such a rule for the Roman soldiers is accordingly not to be denied,³⁵ although it is more difficult to ascertain its scope; perhaps it was just a hygienic regulation for the soldiers, also extended to courtiers. Curiously enough, this regulation was apparently based on old Roman customs, if we follow the indication of the Continuator. A passage of the *Secret History* of Prokopios may perhaps be connected with our argument:

... The factionalists changed the style of their hair to a quite novel fashion, having it cut very differently from the other Romans. They did not touch the moustache or beard at all but were always anxious to let them grow as long as possible, like the Persians (ὥσπερ οἱ Πέρσαι). But the hair on the front of the head they cut right back to the temples, allowing the growth behind to hang down to its full length in a disorderly mass, like the Massagetæ do. This is why they sometimes called this the Hunnish look.³⁶

As we see, Prokopios distinguishes between “Persian” long hair and “Hunnish” ponytails. It would certainly be difficult to classify the “unwashed hair and neglected beard” of Kallistos as a fashion, like the long hair of the factionalists of Justinianic times. But perhaps Kallistos’ untidy hair was not just a consequence of personal neglect and monkish disdain of the body, as the hagiographer obviously intends. In any case, what matters here is the fact that Theophilos did not apparently allow the Roman units of his army to wear their hair long, as the Persians traditionally did. This may be evidence that the Khurramite Persians formed separate units in the Byzantine army (with special regulations?) or, alternatively, that the rule was issued after 838, when the Persians were scattered among the regular military units following their failed rebellion against the emperor. Be this as it may, it

³³ Th. Cont. III.17 (107.6–13).

³⁴ Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger* §38 (137–8). See Auzépy (1997) 6–7 and 232–4 for a French translation and comments on the passage.

³⁵ See Signes Codoñer (1995) 447–8, where some textual arguments for the promulgation of such a rule are discussed.

³⁶ Prokopios, *Secret History* VII.8–10. I cite the translation of Williamson and Sarris (2007).

appears that Theophilos was not so disrespectful of the “Roman” traditions as the hagiographer suggests, perhaps because the emperor was conscious of the social and ethnic tensions among the different communities of the empire. Had Theophilos been the “philobarbarian” depicted in the sources, he could not have avoided facing a rebellion in the army.

8.2 Manuel and Theophobos: Rivals or Targets of the “Romans”?

It is against the background of the aristocratic opposition to Theophilos that we should perhaps judge the information provided by the Continuator and Genesios about the prevailing rivalry between Manuel and Theophobos, two of the main protagonists of Theophilos’ reign.³⁷

According to the sources, Manuel was appointed *magistros* and *domestikos* of the *scholai* by Theophilos upon his return to the empire.³⁸ Genesios and the Continuator have Manuel accompanying Theophilos on three campaigns in Anatolia, but it has been repeatedly argued that these are merely versions of a single campaign, that of 838, and particularly of the battle of Anzes, transmitted by different sources. I will not examine here again all the evidence connecting all these different versions to a single event, for the question will lead us far from our topic.³⁹ However, it is worth recalling some facts that are perhaps of interest.

Manuel appears in two of these versions rescuing the emperor from the enemies surrounding him, when Theophilos faced utmost danger. In one of these versions (Version A), he appears as the sole protagonist of the events.⁴⁰ In the other (Version B), however, the Persian Theophobos appears at the side of Manuel.⁴¹ Both then counsel the emperor to fight during the night, “but others argued, to the contrary, that it was better by day, and the ruler was persuaded by them”. The fight then goes badly for the imperial troops, which are put to flight by the Turkish archers, but “the leaders of the imperial divisions [i.e. Manuel] together with the Persians” defend the emperor bravely despite being surrounded by the enemy. Only when the night comes, putting a provisory end to the fight, “whilst Manuel was occupied with the watch, he somehow heard in the language of the Saracens that the Persian company had made some accord with them and that they had agreed to betray the

³⁷ For an assessment of Theophobos’ life see Chapters 11–12. For Manuel see Chapter 5.

³⁸ Th. Cont. III.26 (120.21–23), Gen. III.14 (48.32–33) and Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 22 (223.154–155).

³⁹ For a comment on these doublets see Grégoire (1933), (1934), Signes Codoñer (1995) 491–500, 507–11, 564–9, (2006), (2013a) and Varona Codeso (2009b) 269–84.

⁴⁰ Th. Cont. III.24 (116.9–118.3) and Gen. III.9 (43.4–44.22). In both writers this first rescue of Theophilos by Manuel preceded the latter’s exile. But this cannot have been the case, as we argued in Chapter 5.3 and 5.5.

⁴¹ Th. Cont. III.31 (126.16–129.11) and Gen. III.13–14 (47.21–49.66).

army of the Romans". Towards dawn, Manuel again manages to get the emperor out and bring him to a safe place.

In a third account (Version C) Manuel and Theophobos appear again fighting at the side of the emperor.⁴² According to the Continuator, Manuel counsels the emperor "that someone should take a contingent of soldiers and go out to meet the enemy, and this by day", but Theophobos "wanted the emperor to be in the ranks and to set upon them by night together with the Persian infantry". However, Theophobos does not convince the emperor, "for many others said that Theophobos was expropriating the glory of the Romans (ὡς σφετεριζομένου τοῦ Θεοφόβου τὴν τῶν Ῥωμαίων δόξαν) and therefore wanted them to do battle at night". Theophilos finally fights during the day but, despite fierce resistance, "the scholai together with the domestikos [Manuel] were constrained to give way and to take flight". Now, the emperor is surrounded by the enemy on a hill with help only from the imperial corps and two thousand Persians, Theophobos amongst them. During the night the emperor manages to escape the enemy and then rewards Theophobos' men for loyalty in such difficult circumstances.

It is surely idle to try to establish which of these versions comes closest to the truth. But it is evident that the sources reflect a clear rivalry between Manuel and Theophobos and distort the facts by favouring one or the other. The reasons for this manipulation lay undoubtedly in the importance of the battle of Anzes of 838, where the emperor suffered a humiliating defeat that anticipated the disaster of Amorion, as we shall see in Chapter 17.2. Neither Manuel nor Theophobos wanted to appear as responsible for the failure, so their partisans concocted different versions favouring their respective heroes. It could be that the versions originated in the monasteries founded respectively by Manuel and Theophobos, as Grégoire argued. However, as we saw in Chapter 5.5, Manuel's fame probably started before he founded the monastery where his memory was preserved. He was a popular figure at the time, the prototype of an *akrites* warrior, and his legend may even have originated first in popular songs. This explains why Manuel appears in all three versions, whereas Theophobos is ignored in one of them. Moreover, two versions clearly present Manuel as the day's hero (Versions A and B), whereas Theophobos appears in a better light in only one of them (Version C). Finally, Theophobos is never presented as taking part directly in the fight. In Version C he just gives the right advice to the emperor, but his Persians are those who defend Theophilos and are rewarded by him for their bravery. Genesis even omits any reference to the flight of Manuel with his troops in Version C and in consequence in all his work.⁴³

⁴² Th. Cont. III.22 (112.22–114.16) and Gen. III.5 and 8 (40.15–20 and 42.71–43.87).

⁴³ Gen. III.8 (42.71–43.87). See Signes Codoñer (1995) 498–9 for the possibility that the source of the Continuator did in fact only mention the flight of the *tagmata* but not of Manuel with them. This supposed flight of Manuel could have been an inference of the historian.

Readers therefore get a more favourable impression of Manuel than of Theophobos. The Armenian general is depicted as a brave warrior, fighting for the emperor until the last moment and even encouraging Theophilos to follow him across the enemy lines in order to escape the impending danger. Moving dialogues between Manuel and Theophilos are reproduced by our historians, while Theophobos is characterized only as a symbolic figure, respected by Theophilos for his ascendancy over the Persians. He does not say a word, just defends himself against the accusations of usurpation his enemies are spreading against him. As we will see in Chapter 12, the Continuator and Genesisios mention that the Persians in fact revolted against the emperor after Anzes, clearly compromising Theophobos in front of the emperor and in the end causing his execution. Manuel, for his part, either died honourably in Anzes as a result of his wounds, or lived on to participate in the restoration of the icons after Theophilos' death.⁴⁴

It would be interesting to identify the “envious men” (φιλοβάσκανοί τινες) and “sycophants” (τῶν συκοφαντῶν) who, according to Genesisios, denounced to the emperor the imperial ambitions of Theophobos when he counselled Theophilos to fight by night.⁴⁵ The Continuator, when rendering this same version of the events, mentions that Theophobos was criticized for pretending to “usurp the glory of the Romans”. We surmise that Theophobos could have met the opposition of some traditional sectors of the army, linked with the aristocracy, who saw with diffidence the ascendancy of the “barbarian” Persians over the emperor. These are the same persons whom Theophilos pardoned despite their desertion after the defeat at Anzes (see Chapter 17.2).

The Armenian Manuel was not among the enemies of Theophobos, for the versions favourable to Manuel do not say a single word against Theophobos. On the contrary, in Version B Theophobos appears to side with Manuel against those who give the wrong counsel to the emperor. It is in this same Version B of the Continuator that Manuel “somehow heard in the language of the Saracens that the Persian company had made some accord with them and that they had agreed to betray the army of the Romans and go back to the leader whom they had deserted” (πρὸς τὴν ἐξ ἧς ἀπέστησαν χωρεῖν κεφαλὴν).⁴⁶ The corresponding passage of Genesisios agrees that the Persians were already speaking to the enemy trying to parley with them and thus betray the emperor to the caliph.⁴⁷ We can perhaps question this version of the events, as Mas‘ūdī presents the leader of the Persian troops, Naṣr, as the rescuer of Theophilos at Anzes.⁴⁸ In any case, no word is said against Theophobos, who appears resilient in accepting his appointment as emperor when the Persians revolt in Sinope (see Chapter 12.2). Finally, the flight of Manuel with his troops in Version C is not only dubious, as we indicated, but

⁴⁴ Signes Codoñer (2013a).

⁴⁵ Gen. III.8 (42.76 and 86).

⁴⁶ Th. Cont. III.32 (128.14–16).

⁴⁷ Gen. III.14 (48.50–54).

⁴⁸ Mas‘ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold* 136, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 332.

also, and most important, appears unmotivated. No single word against Manuel's treachery or cowardice is mentioned in any of these versions.⁴⁹

We may conclude that both Manuel and Theophobos, the Armenian and the Persian, enjoyed the favour of Theophilos before Anzes. They probably faced opposition from some traditional sectors of the army who considered themselves neglected by the emperor and this probably contributed, if not to the defeat at Anzes itself, surely to the political upheavals and usurpations that followed. The different versions of the battle of Anzes were probably promoted by the partisans of Manuel and Theophobos in order to defend their honour and prestige against their common enemy. In doing so, they discredited each other, but this appears to be a side effect of the defence, not its main purpose.

We deal with the particular case of Theophobos and the Persian tagmata in Chapters 9–12, where attention is paid to Theophilos' failed attempt to integrate the "barbarian" Khurramites in the imperial army. As for Manuel, we may perhaps refer here to a story told by the Continuator that appears to promote him as protagonist. The story adds further support to the existence of tensions between "Romans" (of aristocratic families or not) and "barbarians" (Armenians and Persians) in Theophilos' reign.

The Continuator mentions an anonymous domestikos of the scholai, to be identified with our Manuel, who took part in the triumph that followed the victorious campaign of the emperor against the Arabs "at Charsianon".⁵⁰ We will deal with the chronology and the problems related to this campaign in Chapter 14.2, where the alternative datings of 831 and 837 will be considered. For the moment it suffices to say that the account of the Continuator, our only source for these events, focuses neither on the campaign proper nor on the domestikos but on the ensuing triumph and particularly on the singular fight fought at the hippodrome between the eunuch Theodore Krateros and one Arab warrior taken captive by the Byzantines. Since Krateros is one of the future martyrs of Amorion and easily defeats the "barbarian" infidel, this reveals a hagiographic source.

Moreover, the source has a clear patriotic stance, for the Saracen is defeated by a "eunuch and one of no noble birth" (ὕπ' ἀνδρὸς εὐνούχου καὶ οὐ γενναίου τινός). It is perhaps revealing that it is the domestikos, along with the emperor, who appears in the text as supporter of the "barbarian" Saracen against the "Roman" eunuch. The text is worth translating in full:

Now it happened that one of the Hagarenes taken prisoner was famed for his dexterity of hand. The head of the scholai (ὁ τῶν σχολῶν προεστῶς) [i.e. Manuel] acknowledged in written praises his great virtues in war, and he gave assurance that he was adept in horsemanship and excellent in bodily strength and, further, that he went against his opponents wielding two spears with utmost skill and grace. Now, when the triumph of the domestikos was being celebrated in the place of contest

⁴⁹ See also Signes Codoñer (1995) 497–9.

⁵⁰ Th. Cont. III.23 (114.17–116.8).

of the horses (ἐπεὶ γοῦν ἐν τῷ τῶν ἵππων ἀμιλλητηρίῳ ὁ τοῦ δομestikou θρίαμβος ἐτελεῖτο) and this man took the lead, confirming the reports about him by both by his stature of body and preeminence of soul, the emperor, who had also been won over by these praises, saw and commanded that the man should mount a horse and, taking two spears, should display his dexterity and prowess to all the city. When this had been done and brought joy through the spectacle to the more inexperienced, Theodore, called Krateros, who not long afterwards became leader of the company of the 42 Martyrs, came up to the emperor and mocked the Hagarene, saying that he had displayed nothing manly or remarkable. The emperor was irritated with him, “But can you, effeminate and unmanly creature, do any such thing?” Said the other forthwith, “I have not learnt, emperor, nor can I handle two spears, for in war there is no need of such nonsense; but using one spear I have firm trust in God that I shall strike and hurl him down from his horse”. Unable to bear the man’s boldness of speech, the emperor affirmed, invoking the oath upon his own head, that he would put the holy one to death if the two did not indeed turn his words into actions. Thus, mounting his horse and taking the spear in his two hands, Theodore hurled the Saracen down faster than words can describe, in very few rounds; nor did this in any wise give him grand thoughts. The emperor was ashamed in as much as he saw the Saracen thrown down by a eunuch and one of no noble birth; but for the while he kept his cunning, showing favour to him in words out of respect for his valour and bestowing garments and robes upon him out of respect for his way of life.

It does not matter that Theophilos finally favoured the eunuch Krateros, who seems to have played an important role in the campaign of 838. What matters is the purpose of the text in depicting the emperor as a “philobarbarian”, placing at his side the domestikos of the scholai Manuel, who apparently proclaimed a discourse in praise of the abilities of the Arab warrior. Moreover, Manuel is even made the protagonist of the triumph at the hippodrome (ὁ τοῦ δομestikou θρίαμβος). This wording is misleading, for it was not Manuel, but rather the emperor as the head of the imperial army during the campaign, who was obviously honoured by the triumph. But it confirms that Manuel played a very important role in Theophilos’ reign and took sides with the *homines novi* favoured by the emperor, thus infuriating the traditional “Romans” who delighted in the victory of Krateros, despite being a eunuch, over the confident Saracen. This same defence of “Roman” values appears in the *Life* of another martyr of Amorion, Kallistos, as we saw earlier in this chapter.

SECTION III

Supporting the Persian Uprising against the Abbasids

During the iconoclastic period the turbulent region of the southern Caucasus not only remained a melting pot of cultures and a puzzle of small principalities, as it has always been, but also became a fundamental piece in the fight for control of the area between the two main powers, Byzantium to the west and the Abbasid caliphate to the south, as we have already seen in Chapter 2.3 when dealing with the provenance of the troops recruited to Thomas' army. The difficulty of the terrain and the old traditions of autonomy of the local populations, especially the Armenians and Iranians, made it nearly impossible for the two neighbouring empires to assert control directly, so that they relied on local agents. Thus the caliphate acted through the agency of some loyal Armenian principalities, to which honours and recognition were afforded, as well as through independent Arab emirs who had settled in specific areas such as Tiflis and Manazkert. For their part the Byzantines tried to win over some western Armenian princes with the help of their Chalkedonian countrymen established on imperial soil.¹

In the present section we will focus on the Persian Khurramites in the east Caucasus and the coalition they formed with the Byzantines against Abbasid supremacy. We will first look briefly at the religious background to the movement and its geographical extension (Chapter 9). But it is the figures of two of its main leaders, the Persians Naṣr (Chapter 10) and Theophobos (Chapters 11–12), to whom we will direct our attention, as their siding with Theophilus is illustrative of the emperor's expansionist plans towards the principalities of the Caucasus hinterland, a project perhaps not unrelated to the importance of the Armenian component in the imperial court under Theophilus, as we have already seen in Chapters 4–9. Our analysis in this section will serve as a prelude to the campaigns in western Armenia conducted by Theophilus between 834 and 836, including the diplomatic manoeuvres then made by the emperor (and more specifically his alliance with the Iberian Bagratids to the northwest of the Caucasus). These questions are dealt with in Chapter 17 at some length. The alliance with the Khazars, to be analysed in Chapter 21, may be considered a part of the same overall strategy.

¹ For an overview of these problems see Laurent and Canard (1980).

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Chapter 9

Some Remarks on the Khurramite Movement

Much has been written about the Khurramite movement against Islamic rule.¹ Its ultimate roots are to be found in the Mazdakism, a gnostic religious movement that flourished in the reign of the Sassanid king Kavad (488–531). For our purpose, we are interested only in the late phase of the movement that started with the Abbasid Revolution. As is well known, Islamized Persians, particularly those coming from the militarized region of Khurāsān, were the main driving force behind the Abbasids' seizure of power in 750. The overthrow of the Umayyads and the ensuing transfer of the capital from Damascus to Baghdad symbolized a new era for the caliphate where Muslim converts, and especially Iranians, began to play a more determinant role than the Arab tribes themselves, who had formerly founded the caliphate by expanding their power beyond the limits of the Arabian peninsula.²

However, among the Persians living inside the Abbasid caliphate there were many levels of Islamization that depended on their adherence to the Sunni or Shiite creed, but were also determined by the persistence of local religious traditions connected with Zoroastrianism and Mazdakism. Many Persians who had initially backed the Abbasids felt disappointed by the murder of the Persian revolutionary leader Abū Muslim in 755 at the hand of the same Abbasids he had brought to power. His figure became a sort of symbol of Persian self-assertion against Arab dominance and was identified by many Arab heresiographers with the Khurramite movement, which developed mainly in the second half of the eighth century. The movement eventually got the upper hand in the eastward regions of Transoxiana and Khurāsān and extended later to West Iran, mainly to Azerbaijan, Işfahān and Jibāl.

The peak of the revolt was reached in the region of Azerbaijan between 816 and 837 under the leadership of Bābak, who presented himself as a descendant of Abū Muslim. Bābak's insurrection caused many problems to the Abbasid authorities, which were repeatedly defeated in their attempts to crush the rebels until the Persian general Afshīn was entrusted by Mu'taṣim with the direction of the operations against Bābak and defeated him with the help of some Armenian princes. Bābak was brought in chains to Sāmarrā, where he was gruesomely executed.³ The minute details Ṭabarī provides about Bābak's parade and death

¹ See Amoretti (1975), Yarshater (1983) and Madelung (1986), (1988), on which the following exposition is based.

² See the classic study by Kennedy (1981).

³ For a translation of the Arab sources on Bābak see Vasiliev (1935).

are the best proof of the importance of the personage, whose head was sent to Khurāsān to deter his partisans from further rebelling against the caliph.⁴

But before the final defeat and death of the Khurramite leader Bābak in 837, his uprising played a very important role in the history of Byzantine and Muslim relations. The Khurramites not only contacted emperor Theophilos to seal an alliance with him against the Abbasids, but also migrated in large numbers to the Empire when their situation grew critical in Azerbaijan under pressure from the Muslim troops. They are said even to have formed a contingent of Persian troops under one of his leaders, the Persian Theophobos.

The main facts of the military campaigns against the Khurramites are well known to historians, who have devoted considerable attention to them based on Byzantine and oriental sources.⁵ However, little appears to be known about the religious doctrine of the movement or even about the level of support it had among the local populations of the area.

Concerning the doctrine, it is only the testimony of Arab writers that sheds light on the main points of their credo. Ehsan Yarshater made a summary of the evidence provided by these sources, from which the following aspects can be highlighted: (1) belief in the two primordial principles of Light and Darkness; (2) denial of God as active Providence; (3) occultation or return of divine leaders or imams; (4) reincarnation or metempsychosis as the true meaning of resurrection.⁶

As we see, these points clearly detach the Khurramites from Islam but also from Christianity. It cannot be doubted that important groups of Persian Khurramites found refuge in Byzantium and formed special contingents under the banner of the emperor, but it appears somewhat strange that they could convert so easily to Christianity as is recorded by Michael the Syrian, who says that when the Khurramites found themselves in a critical position because of the attacks of the Muslim troops, “most of the followers of Bābak along with the general Naṣr ... went to meet Theophilos, the emperor of the Romans, and converted to Christianity”.⁷

The Continuator gives a somewhat different account, for he records that Bābak “made submission for himself and all his people to the emperor” (τῷ βασιλεῖ ἑαυτὸν τε καὶ τὸ ὅλον ἔθνος ὑπήκοον τέθεικε), but does not say that they converted to Christianity.⁸ Significantly, he adds that the emperor “made it legal (νομοθετεῖ) for any Persian to marry a Roman and to be joined and united in wedlock”.⁹ If we take

⁴ Ṭabarī III.1229–1234, trans. Bosworth (1991) 84–93.

⁵ See for example Rekaya (1974), Rosser (1974), Laurent and Canard (1980) *passim* (see index) but esp. 362–3 with a short chronology of his fight against the caliphate, Ditten (1993) 93–110, Bartikian (1994) and Cheynet (1998).

⁶ Yarshater (1983) 1011–12.

⁷ Mich. Syr. 531, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 88.

⁸ Th. Cont. III.21 (112.12–13). Similar words appear in Gen. III.3 (38.55–56).

⁹ Th. Cont. III.21 (112.15–16). In Gen. III.3 (38.59–60) there is no reference to a law, for he says that Theophilos “married the Persians to (create) a close kinship with the Romans” (τοὺς Πέρσας... πρὸς ἀγγιστεῖαν τε Ῥωμαίων ἐν γάμοις ἀρμόζεται).

seriously this reference to a special law of the emperor allowing the marriage of Persians with “Romans”, that is to say Christians, this would be the first evidence for the existence of some kind of mixed marriages among Christians and non-Christians that the emperor tried to slowly implement to promote the integration of the Khurramites in the long term.

That the Khurramites could not but remain attached to their beliefs after entering Byzantine territory is perhaps confirmed by a curious remark the Continuator makes after reporting the secret execution of Theophobos in the imperial palace at the end of Theophilos’ reign:

ἐκείθεν οὖν καὶ διαβεβόηται μέχρι τοῦδε παρὰ Πέρσαις μὴ ὄψεσθαι θάνατον τὸν Θεόφοβον ἀλλ’ ἐν ἀφθαρσίᾳ διαζῆν, τῷ κρύβδῳ ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἀναφανδὸν τὸν ἐκείνου θάνατον γενέσθαι ποτέ.

From then until now it is proclaimed by the Persians that Theophobos would not see death but continued to live in incorruptibility, for his death took place in hiding and was never revealed.¹⁰

This appears as clear confirmation that the kind of leadership Theophobos exerted upon his men was close to the concept of imamate followed by the Khurramites and mentioned above.¹¹

Ascertaining the extent of Khurramite support beyond the main area of Azerbaijan is also problematic. This is an important point, for it will allow us to judge the impact of the campaigns led by the Khurramites in northern Syria and western Armenia that we will deal with in Chapters 15 and 16. In fact the existence of Persian or Kurdish autonomous lordships in the Armenian lands during this period was probably not limited to the lands of the Khurramite rebels to the east and may have been more significant than is usually assumed. We must consider for example that the so-called emirs of Manazkert, who at the beginning of the ninth century rebelled against the authority of the Abbasid governors in Dvin, were probably of Iranian origin. The first Qaysite lord of Manazkert, Jahḥāf, who according to the Armenian historian Vardan married a daughter of Musegh Mamikonian, came from a Persian house if we give credence to the *History of Armenia* written by the katholikos John VI of Draskhanakert in the first quarter of the tenth century.¹² His successor, the emir Sawāda, who again married an

¹⁰ Th. Cont. III.38 (136.20–23).

¹¹ Gen. III.7 (42.68–70) does not mention the incorruptibility, but says that the belief that Theophobos is alive “is still current today” among the Persians, more than a century after events. See Signes Codoñer (1995) 584–5.

¹² Maksoudian (1973) translated the history into English, but only from Chapter XXV onwards, so I take this information from the previous part of the work from Ter-Gherwondyan (1976) 34, since the French translation of M.J. St-Martin (Paris, 1868–1869) is apparently not reliable. The information taken from katholikos Johannes makes Ter-

Armenian princess, this time of the Bagratid house, is also presented as “a man of Persian extraction” by the same author.¹³ It is surely the case that the Jahhāfids were arabized,¹⁴ as they are named Sulami (i.e. of the tribe of the Qaysites) by the Arabic writer Ya‘qūbī, but it cannot be denied that their power had a strong local basis and probably originated from intermarriage with Persian and Armenian lords. It is therefore interesting to note that Sawāda, who ruled in Manazkert from approximately 821, was defeated in about 833 by the army of the governor of Dvin when he led an alliance against him supported by the sparapet Simbat and Prince Sahak of Siwnik’, two of the most eminent Bagratid rulers. If we consider that the Khurramite leader Bābak, who had formerly joined the rulers of Siwnik’ in a common cause against the caliphate,¹⁵ still held at the time a part of this eastern province of Armenia, we can conclude that Persian and Armenian disaffection for the caliphate partly coalesced toward the beginning of the second quarter of the ninth century, although their different interests hindered a steady union between the partners, who more often than not went their separate ways.

It could of course be wrong to consider any autonomous Persian element in Armenia and the Caucasus as a potential ally of the Khurramites, since the Islamized Persians formed the basis of Abbasid power. In the chronicle of Michael the Syrian the supporters of the caliph Ma’mūn against the rebels are named simply “Persians”. This even explains the widespread support the Arab rebel Naṣr enjoyed in Syria against Baghdad between 812 and 825 (see Chapter 5.2). But we must not automatically presume that every Persian supporter of the Abbasids was a follower of Islam. A Persian of the Sogdiana, Afshīn, one of the most important generals of the period and a man on whom caliph Ma’mūn mostly relied, openly despised the Law and had always with him the sacred books of the Persians.¹⁶ The continuous success of the revolt of the Khurramites in Azerbaijan and other areas of Persia was perhaps a more serious problem for the Abbasids than is generally presumed, for it acted as a symbol of Persian resistance.

Hārūn al-Rashīd had already promoted and retained some Armenian nobles (such as Ashot Msaker, named by him Prince of Armenia¹⁷) in order to check the separatist moves of many local Muslim lords. Any massive emigration of Armenians to Byzantium, like those undertaken by the Amatuni and other Armenian clans in the eighth century should, in the eyes of Baghdad, be prevented,

Gherwondyan affirm that “This gives us some grounds for supposing that he may have been of Kurdish descent, but unfortunately, our information concerning Kurdish history in this period is so fragmentary that it is impossible to ascertain whether there had been any Kurdish activity in the southern districts of Armenia during the eighth and ninth centuries.”

¹³ Maksoudian (1973) 98 (Chapter XXV).

¹⁴ Ter-Gherwondyan (1976) 34.

¹⁵ Laurent (1919) 111, 319–20 and Laurent and Canard (1980) 139–40, 165, 362.

¹⁶ Vasiliev (1935) 115.

¹⁷ Laurent (1919) 98–9, 103–4, 336 and Laurent and Canard (1980) 131–2, 135–6, 402–3.

because it left control of the deserted lands in the hands of Muslim lords who acted independently from the central power in the capital. Some of them could have had, as we have seen, Persian origins.

In sum, the danger of the Khurramites was felt by Ma'mūn to be one of the most important threats to the Abbasid caliphate. It is of no surprise that, according to the narrative of Ṭabarī, he wrote in his last will, addressed to his brother and heir Mu'tasim, the following:

Hurry away from me quickly on your journey and head speedily for the seat of your authority in Iraq. Look to these people in whose land you find yourself, and do not neglect them at any time. Launch against the Khurramiyya expeditions led by a commander who is resolute, fierce and firm, and support him with finance, arms and troops, both cavalry and infantry. If they are away campaigning for a long time, concentrate your attention on them and send them reinforcements from the auxiliaries and retainers whom you have around you.¹⁸

What renders more significant the mention of the Khurramites in this text is the fact that Ma'mūn does not specify in it any further threat against the caliphate. It is in this context that we should appreciate the importance of the contacts Theophilus made at the same time with the Persian rebels and the Armenian lords. There was real danger for the caliphate that Byzantine policy could succeed in joining together the disaffected rulers of the Armenian territory against the caliph's rule.

¹⁸ Ṭabarī III.1138, trans. Bosworth (1987) 228.

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Chapter 10

Naṣr the Khurramite

Among the military leaders of the Khurramite revolt against the Abbasids the oriental sources mention a certain Naṣr. His role in the movement and his identity have been subject to intense debate since Henri Grégoire proposed his identification with the Persian Theophobos, mentioned in the Greek sources as one of the most trusted men of the emperor Theophilos, even his presumptive heir to the throne at the beginning of the reign. This identification is by no means a secondary issue for the understanding of Theophilos' policies towards the east. Accordingly we will submit it to a detailed analysis in the pages that follow.

10.1 The Literary Sources

We quote again in full the passage from Michael the Syrian where he refers for the first time to the Khurramite leader Naṣr:

In this time most of the followers of Bābak along with the general Naṣr, since they were suffering extreme hardships caused by the war they had engaged against the Persians [i.e. the Abbasid troops], went to meet Theophilos, the emperor of the Romans, and converted to Christianity.¹

This passage makes the rebel Naṣr a Khurramite follower of Bābak who became Christian as he entered Byzantine territory seeking refuge in the face of attacks by Muslim troops. But when did his flight to the Byzantine Empire take place?

According to Ṭabarī, in 833 the Khurramites rebelled in many areas of the important province of Jibāl, taking cities such as Hamadhān and Iṣfahān. Shortly after Muʿtaṣim came to the power in August 833 he sent an expedition against them under the command of the newly appointed governor of Jibāl, Iṣḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muṣʿab. It was the very end of the autumn, the dhu al-Qiʿdah month of HA 218 (from November 18 to December 17, 833). The governor reported a victory over the rebels as early as December 25, 833. He is said to have killed 60,000 Khurramites, whereas “the rest fled to the Byzantine territory.”²

Was Naṣr one of the Khurramite rebels of Jibāl who then took refuge in Byzantium? A further passage in Ṭabarī about Theophilos' expedition against Sozopetra in 837 seems to favour this identification. The text reads as follows:

¹ Mich. Syr. 531, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 88.

² Ṭabarī III.1165, trans. Bosworth (1991) 2–3.

It has been mentioned that Theophilos set out with a force of 100,000 men – or, it has been said, more than that – including 70,000 odd regular army and the rest auxiliary troops, until he reached Zibaṭra. He had with him a group of the Muḥamirrah who had been involved in the revolt in Jibāl and had subsequently joined up with the Byzantines at the time when Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muṣ‘ab had fought with them; their leader was Bārsīs.³

Grégoire suggested that the name Bārsīs in Ṭabarī was a false reading and that the text originally had Narsīs.⁴ This would correspond to the Persarmenian name of Narseh that was supposed to be the correct name of the Naṣr cited in Michael the Syrian and, as we will see subsequently, also of the Naṣr cited in Mas‘ūdī. The letters *bā’* and *nūn* are easy to confound in Arabic, as the first has a dot below and the latter one above when they appear in the initial position.⁵ However, the Arabic distinguishes quite clearly long and short vowels and Bārsīs has [ā] whereas Narsīs does not. Moreover, the only two literary sources that contain the name of the Persian rebel write it with an emphatic “s” as Naṣr or Naṣīr and this [ṣ] can hardly be mistaken for a not emphatic one in the Arabic alphabet; neither is the *metathesis* sr > rs easily explained from a graphic point of view.

We should consider finally that the text of Ṭabarī, as Mohamed Rekaya notes,⁶ has a significant variant exactly on this point and should be rendered “they are named (*bismi bihum*) Bārsīs,”⁷ that is to say, “Persians,” instead of “his leader (*ra’isuhum*) was Bārsīs.” Accordingly, the text provides no evidence connecting Naṣr with the Jibāl Khurramites.⁸

Curiously enough, Mohamed Rekaya took for granted that Naṣr was a Khurramite rebel in Jibāl and tried to prove that the rebels of this region acted independently of Bābak.⁹ Certainly, as Rekaya rightly argues, the Khurramites were not organized into a homogeneous army in all the regions where they gained support, so that Bābak could probably not have had a lieutenant in distant Jibāl following his orders, but if we make Naṣr a lieutenant of Bābak in Azerbaijan, as is expressly stated by Michael the Syrian, this problem disappears. Naṣr’s direct relation to Bābak in Azerbaijan is assured by Michael the Syrian, whereas his link with the rebels in Jibāl is just conjectural.

³ Ṭabarī III.1235, trans. Bosworth (1991) 95.

⁴ Vasiliev (1935) 138, note 3.

⁵ These kinds of errors with dots are frequent. In fact, the name Bārsīs is rendered Tārsīs in a further manuscript.

⁶ Rekaya (1974) 45, note 4.

⁷ Ṭabarī III.1235 note e.

⁸ Mich. Syr. 529, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 84 mentions the expedition of Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muṣ‘ab in the year 1146 (835) “against the rebels of Madai and the mountain of Chadqa” without identifying them as Khurramites or naming Naṣr.

⁹ Rekaya (1974).

The date of the flight of Naşr to Byzantium should therefore not be connected with the defeat of the Khurramites of Jibāl in December 833 and could have taken place some time later from Azerbaijan, as the position of Bābak in this region was becoming increasingly precarious, perhaps about 834–835. The warm welcome Theophilos gave to his co-religionists in December 833 may have contributed to the flight of Naşr from Azerbaijan to the empire. Despite Rekaya, the Khurramites seem to be connected by the same faith in all the provinces where their rebellion broke out.¹⁰ Mas‘ūdī speaks in fact of the rebels of Azerbaijan and Jibāl who took refuge in the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Theophilos, as if they formed part of the same group.¹¹

Michael seems to connect Naşr’s flight to the events of the year 837, when Bābak was finally defeated, for he says that Theophilos, who apparently thought that he could defeat the Muslims with the help of the Khurramites, led an expedition against Sozopetra after they had fled to him.¹² But Michael could have summarized his source, for he does not specify how much earlier the Khurramites arrived in Byzantium. He also seems to be unaware of the existence of several campaigns of the Khurramites and Theophilos in western Armenia as early as between 834 and 836, of which we are informed through Armenian sources (see Chapter 15). If we suppose that Naşr was by then the military commander, his arrival in Byzantium should be dated to the beginning of 834. A further passage in Michael the Syrian, in which Bābak, realizing “that his movement had become weak and that his followers had fled into the country of the Romans,” gives orders to bury his treasure and takes flight to Byzantium, is too vague to be adduced in support of the idea that Naşr’s flight had taken place just before.¹³ The possibility that Naşr had already joined the Byzantines from Azerbaijan in 834 is therefore the most likely possibility.

The next comment about Naşr appears in the *Golden Meadows* of Mas‘ūdī and is connected with the campaign of Theophilos in 838. The Arab historian tells us that Theophilos saved his own life in a pitched battle against the army of the caliph due to “the protection of a converted Christian named Naşīr who was helped by some of his comrades.”¹⁴ This Naşīr is undoubtedly the same person as the Naşr of Michael the Syrian. This information is very important, as we see that the Persian fugitives have already entered Theophilos’ army.

After the crushing defeat of the emperor in 838 and the capture of Amorion, the figure of Naşr appears again in the narrative of Michael the Syrian. According to him, the caliph Mu‘taşim demanded from the Byzantine emissary sent to him by Theophilos that all the Muslim prisoners be released but also that “Naşr the

¹⁰ Madelung (1988).

¹¹ Vasiliev (1935) 333–4.

¹² Mich. Syr. 531, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 88.

¹³ Mich. Syr. 533, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 90.

¹⁴ Vasiliev (1935) 332.

Khourdanaya, his son and Manuel” be handed over to him.¹⁵ Again Naṣr is the same person mentioned before by Michael in connection with Bābak, “Khourdanaya” being the Syrian equivalent for Arabic “Khourramiyya.” The petition of the caliph reveals that Naṣr had been causing considerable trouble to the Muslims since he fled to Byzantium. Manuel was another famous deserter of the caliphate, an Armenian general and relative of the empress Theodora (see Chapter 5). The problems Manuel’s flight caused caliph Ma’mūn during his campaign against Cappadocia in 830 (see Chapter 14.1) explain all too well why his handover was demanded by Ma’mūn’s successor Mu’taṣim.

But if the mention of these two persons in the caliph’s petition requires no further explanation, how should we understand his demand that Naṣr’s son also be handed over to him? We do not know how old Naṣr’s son was in 838, but I think we should dismiss the idea that he was a child or a youth without any military experience. If this had been the case, the caliph could have made his demand in order to avoid the son taking the place of the father and thus continuing the fight against the caliphate in the future. But even if we concede that Naṣr had only one son and that this son was destined to succeed his father in a dynastic way (and this is already supposing too much), there would continue to be something strange about the caliph’s petition, as it was to be expected that other members of Naṣr’s family could also rightly succeed Naṣr. That is to say, the delivery of Naṣr’s son to the caliph was of no use insofar as dynastic or legitimacy rights were concerned, as Naṣr fled to Byzantium not alone but followed by many partisans (and most probably relatives): any of them could assume his role in the fight against the caliphate. Accordingly, I suspect that Naṣr’s son had already played a significant role in the war, perhaps leading some army or detachment in person. This was the reason that he was so important to the caliph, not just his being the son of a Khurramite rebel. We will return to this point below.

One more mention of Naṣr is found in Michael the Syrian, only a few lines after the first, in connection with a further campaign of the Arabs against Byzantium.¹⁶ Abū Sa’īd, the newly appointed governor of Mesopotamia (Jazīra) and Syria, leads an expedition against Byzantium. He enters the imperial territory through one pass whereas a second contingent, led by the Arab general Bashīr and the people of Mopsuestia, enters through another. When Bashīr has already taken many cattle and captives from the Romans, Naṣr encounters and defeats him, taking back the Roman captives. However, the general Abū Sa’īd comes to help his man and captures and kills Naṣr. No dating is provided, but as the information appears after the campaign of Amorion and Abū Sa’īd replaces ‘Abbās, the son of al-Ma’mūn executed in 838 (see Chapter 18), the year 839 appears likely. By this time, as we shall see in Chapter 18.1, the rebellion of the Persians in Sinope had already come to an end.

The place where the encounter took place is not named, but given that most of the Muslims who fought against the Khurramites were natives of Mopsuestia,

¹⁵ Mich. Syr. 536, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 96.

¹⁶ Mich. Syr. 536–7, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 96.

it is to be supposed that it was somewhere along the Cilician border. In this account Michael tells us that Naṣr was the leader of the Khurramites, who fought to the death after their master was murdered. The piece ends by mentioning the joy felt by the caliph when he saw Naṣr's severed and salted head, because "he had devastated Sozopetra." By this he meant that Naṣr took part in the campaign Theophilus directed against that city in 837 (see Chapter 16), a detail no other source provides.

Arab poets offer additional information about the place where Naṣr's final battle was fought, but this evidence is difficult to assess. Abū Tammām wrote a poem for the general Abū Sa'īd, where a defeat of the Khurramites is mentioned taking place at Wādī 'Aqarqas in Byzantine territory. According to the poem, the throats of the Khurramites were all slit.¹⁷ Marius Canard rightly identified this battle with the one mentioned by Michael the Syrian in which Naṣr was finally put to death. This battle is mentioned also, although more vaguely, in the pieces the Arab poet Buḥturī addressed to Abū Sa'īd.¹⁸ However, we do not know where the river 'Aqarqas flows, and the location in the Boukellarion theme advanced conjecturally by Belke and Restle seems to lie too much to the north of the Byzantine frontier.¹⁹ The two Arab poets nowhere mention the supposed conversion of the Khurramites to Christianity.

10.2 The Tourmarches of the Phoideratoi and the Persian Tourma

There is just one more piece of information that sheds some light on Naṣr, although it has been disregarded until now. This is curious enough, as the information is provided not by later literary sources but by a contemporary Byzantine lead seal. Two seals bearing the name [A]JANAΣIP on the reverse and dated in the first half of the ninth century were documented many years ago.²⁰ The name and dating fit

¹⁷ Canard apud Vasiliev (1935) 400.

¹⁸ Canard apud Vasiliev (1935) 400–401, 403 and 406.

¹⁹ Belke and Restle (1984) 118, who discard, however, another possible location of the place on the route leading from the Cilician Gates to Amorion, which would fit with a battle fought on the border.

²⁰ Zacos and Veglery (1972–1985) vol. I.3, 1760, nr. 3148a and b. I have been unable to determine the present whereabouts of the seal, although I have contacted many scholars in Washington, Paris, Geneva and Vienna in this respect. Jean-Claude Cheynet writes me via e-mail on Dec. 20, 2011: "J'ignore qui est ce Nasr tourmarque des Fédérés. La gravure est grossière. Je ne crois pas qu'il s'agisse du futur Théophobe, car la dignité de spathaire est bien basse pour un futur patrice." This points to a provincial provenance of the seal that perfectly suits our argumentation in the following pages. Concerning the reading, although it is not completely sure, it seems to me the most probable. See the comments Alexandra Wassiliou-Seibt made to me via e-mail on Dec. 21, 2011: "Beide Exemplare bei Zacos-Veglery erhalten den Namen des Sieglers nicht vollständig. Das einzig sichere ist IP in der zweiten Zeile des Av. Die Hypothese Nasir ist nicht vertretbar, weil schon von der inneren Symmetrie her in der ersten Zeile 5 Zeichen (4 Buchstaben und ein Kreuz davor) Platz

perfectly in with our Khurramite.²¹ The title and the office accompanying the name in dative are even more interesting: β(ασιλικῶ) σπα(θαρίῳ) καὶ τουρμά(ρχῆ) τῶν φοιδεράτων), “to the imperial spatharios and tourmarches of the phoideratoi”.



Figure 1 Seal of Naṣr/Nasir, as τουρμάρχης τῶν φοιδεράτων, Zacos and Veglery (1972) vol. I.3, 1760, numbers 3148a and b (present whereabouts unknown)

As we saw in Chapter 2.1, the appointed tourmarchai of the phoideratoi in the ninth century (Leo the Armenian, Thomas the Slav or even Michael the Amorian) were of foreign or “barbarian” origin. This tallies well with the seal of ΝΑΣΙΡ we are considering here, since the name Nasir is surely not Greek, but probably Persian or Arabic. That the Khurramite rebel Naṣr, after leaving Bābak and entering Byzantium, could be appointed tourmarches of the phoideratoi once he converted to Christianity should come as no surprise to us, considering the evidence seen so far. In fact, all appointed tourmarchai of the phoideratoi seem to have been of foreign origin.

haben. Die bereits von Zacos-Veglery vorgeschlagenen Alternativen Alnasir/Elnasir wären denkbar. Der letzte fragmentarisch erhaltene Buchstabe in der ersten Zeile des Av. ist ein Alpha, ob davor tatsächlich ein N steht oder nur so aussieht, muss ich offen lassen, die Stelle ist zudem beschädigt. Vielleicht sind es Reste von zwei Buchstaben. Artaser (?) ist eine weitere Hypothese.” She continues to date the seal at the turn of the eighth to the ninth century or to the first half of the ninth.

²¹ Only the Arabic article “al” before his name (according to the editors we should read “al-Nasir” or “el-Nasir”) could be perhaps a problem for a Persian Khurramite, but only if we consider that the Khurramites broke completely with the surrounding Arab culture of their native lands. The opposite is apparently the case, for they are told to parley in Arabic with the Muslims on the eve of the defeat at Anzes, see Th. Cont. III.32 (128.13–14). However, other renderings are possible, as we have only traces of a Λ or an A at the beginning of the first line.

It is in this context that we can make some sense of how the post of *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* could have been granted to a Persian immigrant like Naṣr. His appointment continued the policies followed by the empire with the previous nominees for commanding these elite frontier troops. But perhaps in his case an important change took place, for Naṣr entered the Byzantine Empire accompanied by a significant number of troops. It is now worth considering whether this might explain the development of the *tourma* of the *phoideratoi* as reflected in the sources of the ninth century: I mean specifically the identity of this *tourma* with the famous Persian detachments created by Theophilos.

If we admit that the Persian Naṣr of the literary sources is the Nasir *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* who appears on a lead seal from the beginning of the ninth century, we should then also suppose that the number of the *phoideratoi* increased noticeably with the arrival of the Persian troops of the Khurramites led by Naṣr c. 834. The Continuator and Genesios say that the Khurramite Bābak had 7,000 men at his disposal when he entered Byzantine territory and went as far as Sinope to submit his people to the emperor.²² But perhaps the numbers provided by this information reflect the actual strength of the Khurramite forces at the end stage of their fight against the caliph. How many men arrived in Byzantium is difficult to ascertain from this passage.

The Continuator and Genesios tell us too that the Persian troops numbered 30,000 men when they rebelled against Theophilos.²³ These numbers have generally been regarded with much scepticism,²⁴ for they are considered too high for the standards of the age. However, the sources reflect the fact that a large number of Persians enlisted themselves as soldiers in the Byzantine Empire during Theophilos' reign. They were probably included in the units of the *phoideratoi* as separate units with their own commanders. The Persian detachments could perhaps by then have constituted the most significant contingent of the *phoideratoi*. That the Persian Naṣr was appointed their commander is representative of the new situation. If this reasoning is sound, then we can understand how a few thousand Persian immigrants expanded to form a unit of 30,000 men, as the Greek sources tell us, this last number being the total approximate sum of the contingents of the *phoideratoi*.

The rebellion of the Persians against Theophilos in about 838, of which we shall speak in Chapter 12, surely put an end to this large army of outsiders and immigrants. The Continuator and Genesios say that the 30,000 Persians were distributed among the contingents of the thematic armies and speak of a ratio of 2,000 soldiers to each one. Warren Treadgold made an accurate reconstruction of this procedure, taking for granted the existence of 15 themes at the time, but also

²² Th. Cont. III.21 (112.8–13) and Gen. III.3 (38.49–56). We will suggest in Chapter 11 some interpretations of this episode.

²³ Th. Cont. III.29 (125.4–6) and Gen. III.6 (41.51–52).

²⁴ See however Treadgold (1988) 299–300 and 314–15.

supposing that not every theme received the same contingents.²⁵ Although this reckoning may seem too precise, it appears reasonable to suppose that the mighty phoideratoi, charged with defending most of the eastern frontier, were divided into several contingents with their own *tourmarchai*. This would explain, as we saw in Chapter 2.1, the linking of the *tourmarches* of the phoideratoi with the new *tourmarches* of the Lycaonians and Pisidians that appears in Skylitzes and in the *taktika*. It is only a possibility, but a likely one, that these new *tourmarchai* of the southern districts of the *Anatolikon* were initially a constituent part of the army of the phoideratoi defending Byzantine territory from Muslim inroads coming from Cilicia. If we take into account the fact that the main invasions of Byzantium during the reign of Theophilos set off from Cilicia, this points to the importance of Byzantine troops watching this part of the empire's long border. It comes as no surprise that Naṣr died while fighting a Muslim attack from Cilicia.

As we see, these sources complement each other in drawing a coherent picture of the figure of the Khurramite Naṣr. It is now time to consider whether this picture is compatible with the information the Byzantine sources provide about the Persian Theophobos, who was to be married to Theophilos' own sister.

²⁵ Treadgold (1988) 314–15.

Chapter 11

Theophobos and his Father

The figure of Theophobos is given much importance in the narratives of the Byzantine chronicles about the reign of Theophilos. Indeed, Theophobos seems to play a key position in the policies of Theophilos and to have been one of the people he trusted most. Accordingly, we have at our disposal sufficient details about his life to draw a rough profile of his career, although they are occasionally contradictory on minor points.

11.1 Birth and Courtly Upbringing of a Noble Persian Youth

The two versions of Theophobos' first years recorded by Genesisios and the Continuator agree that he was born in Constantinople of a Persian nobleman.¹ They differ, however, on the circumstances that led Theophobos' father to Constantinople. The first version speaks only of the father as being a Persian ambassador in the Byzantine capital and having conceived the child who was to be named Theophobos out of an illicit relationship with an unnamed woman (μη̄ ἐκ νομίμων γάμων Gen.; οὐκ ἐκ νομίμου συναφείας, κρυφίου δὲ καὶ λαθραίας Th. Cont.). According to the Continuator, the father left the city after that (ἐξάπεδήμησεν). Later, when the Persians were looking for a leader of noble descent in their fight against the Muslims, the man directed their attention to his own son in Constantinople.² Genesisios' account says nothing about the father after Theophobos was born, but it seems to imply that he had already died, for it is a servant of the noble ambassador who puts the Persians onto Theophobos' trail.³ This point makes more sense at first sight, for if the father were alive, he should have been elected leader of the Persians instead of his lost child. However, it seems that the Continuator's account is to be followed here, as the father of Theophobos appears later, in this first version from Genesisios, meeting the Persian leader Bābak

¹ Genesisios is to be preferred in this case to the account of the Continuator, who tried partially to combine the two versions of his sources into one single narrative. However, some interesting details of the original sources are preserved in the Continuator, who deserves attention too. For details about the construction of the narrative see Signes Codoñer (1995) 471–5 and 484–7.

² Th. Cont. III.19 (110.7–17).

³ Gen. III.3 (37.29–32). The embassy is depicted as being occasional in the Continuator (εἰς πρεσβείαν ... ποτε) but Genesisios states that the ambassador was “many times” (πολλαχῶς) in Constantinople.

in Sinope,⁴ as we shall see subsequently in section 11.2. So the theory can be sustained that the father of Theophobos was still alive in this version of events, however illogical the story may appear. Maybe this contradiction reveals some imperfect reworking of the real events? Before coming to any conclusion, let us see the second version of the origins of Theophobos.

The second version, preserved by Genesios and the Continuator,⁵ states that the father was no ambassador at all, but a Persian of royal descent (if not a king) who came to Constantinople as a refugee when the war obliged him to leave his country. The Persian, who lived as a beggar, worked for some time for a barmaid in the capital before falling in love with her. She was to give birth to Theophobos. When the father died⁶ the royal descent of Theophobos was made known to the Persian noblemen through the magical arts they used to profess.

This second version seems to be a more palatable rendering of the events insofar as it makes the birth of Theophobos legitimate. This is clearly stressed by the Continuator, who speaks of legal union (νομίμω συναφεία) between the Persian and the barmaid.⁷ Genesios says too that Theophobos was born κατὰ συζυγίαν, that is to say, inside marriage.⁸ Moreover, the abject poverty of the Persian we do not find in the first version seems to have been concocted only in order to give credibility to a respectable relationship between the two partners. We must not forget that barmaids usually suffered a bad reputation, being connected with prostitution. Finally, that magic revealed the existence of Theophobos to the Persians after his father had died is obviously a fantasy. As the father of Theophobos was made to die in the second version, an expedient was needed in order to make known to the Persians the identity of his forgotten son, so what could be more appropriate than magic? As Genesios and the Continuator remark, perhaps following a justification they found in their common source, “the magic arts were still blossoming among the Persians”. Therefore I consider it very likely that the writer of this version wanted to get rid of the figure of the father and made him die just after the birth of Theophobos. In fact, the father remains active among the Persian noblemen in the first version. He could have been a significant person among his countrymen and was perhaps also well known to the Byzantines. Could this figure have compromised the eulogy of Theophobos that the author of this second version was intending to write? If so, this was a reason for getting him out of the narrative. There could have been, however, other reasons for doing that.

But maybe this second version was intended to be more than a panegyric to Theophobos. The finding of the Persian baby by the Persian noblemen guided by signs in the sky closely resembles in Genesios’ wording the finding of Jesus by

⁴ Gen. III.3 (38.52–54).

⁵ Gen. III.4 (38.62–40.14) and Th. Cont. III.20 (111.10–112.21).

⁶ Gen. III.4 (39.88): προτετελευτηκέναι; Th. Cont. III.20 (111.19–20): ὁ μὲν ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἐγένετο.

⁷ Th. Cont. III.20 (111.19).

⁸ Gen. III.4 (39.89).

the Persian magi in the New Testament:⁹ both even performed proskynesis before the newborn! The smell of a hagiographical reworking of the story is here clearly appreciable. This is easily explainable if we take into account that Theophobos founded a monastery in Constantinople, as we shall see below. That a *Life of Theophobos* was written to whitewash some compromising details of his biography is an old conjecture, already advanced by Henri Grégoire.¹⁰ But Grégoire went a step further and concluded that the pious monks of his monastery forged all the above details about the birth of Theophobos, because he thought that Theophobos was the same person as Naṣr who was evidently not born in Constantinople. We will see that his hypothesis is untenable for several reasons. For the moment it will suffice to say that the two versions are not equally untrustworthy, as Grégoire assumed. Genesios was aware of the difference between the two, as he introduced his narrative with the following words:

Ὡς δέ τινες, καὶ ἄλλως τὰ κατὰ Θεόφοβον διίστόρηται, ἃ τῶν λεχθέντων τελοῦσι παρόμοια, ἀπαράλλακτα δὲ οὐδαμῶς, κατὰ τὸ διάφορον τῶν ταῦτα διεξιόντων τῆς τε αὐτοψίας καὶ τῆς πρὸς ἑτέρους ἐν διηγῆσει μετοχετεύσεως¹¹

Kaldellis renders the passage as follows:

Some have related the story of Theophobos differently, in similar manner to our previous narrative, although in no way identically. Any differences between the various accounts of these events can be attributed to the difference between being an eyewitness and obtaining information at second-hand.¹²

Genesios does not say which version is closer to the events and which was based on second-hand information. But if we take into account the inferences we have already made, it seems to me that the second version could have been a later hagiographic reworking. Accordingly, it could be argued that this second version (let us call it Version B from now on) was inspired in the first one (Version A), for both look like folktales. However, Version B also contains some details that may reflect the truth and are not found in Version A.

In fact, Version A makes less sense than Version B when recounting how the Persians made known to the emperor the identity of Theophobos. According to the account by Genesios, Theophobos was living in the district of Oxeia with his mother, after his father the Persian ambassador abandoned her. His identity was established first by “some Persians who *infiltrated* the City under orders to *secretly* locate this youth” (ὄθεν *παρεισδύντων* αὐτῇ τῶν περὶ τούτου διατεταγμένων *κρύφα* καταστοχάσασθαι, καὶ ἀναγνωρισάντων τὸν νεανίαν). They indeed found and

⁹ Signes Codoñer (1995) 484, note 2.

¹⁰ Grégoire (1934).

¹¹ Gen. III.4 (38.62–39.65).

¹² Kaldellis (1998) 52.

recognized Theophobos as the son of their former ambassador, but “as knowledge of this youth had *soon* reached even the imperial ears, the Persians in the City agreed that, for that reason, it was necessary for the Persian nation to send ambassadors to the Romans, and they came to arrange a final treaty of peaceful subjection to them”.¹³ In the rendering of this episode in the Continuator the Persian envoys are also *secretly* (κρύφα) sent to Constantinople to find Theophobos, but when they identify him living with his mother at the Oxeia, they reveal their mission to the emperor without further delay and without being apparently compelled to do so by any circumstance. They then promise Theophilos to sign a treaty and declare their allegiance to the empire if only Theophobos is given to them.¹⁴ It is nowhere explained why the emperor should have taken notice of the mission being carried out by secret agents of the Persians in the capital or even why they should have said anything to him.

Genesios’ Version B is on this point more coherent, for we are told that the Persian envoys came to Constantinople to fulfil their mission with the approval of the emperor, who was informed of the Persians’ purpose from the very beginning, as was to be expected. Genesios gives many details of how the Persian envoys looked for Theophobos, side by side with the imperial men.¹⁵ The Continuator is not clear about this point, for he seems to prefer Version A and makes a drastic summary of the narrative of Version B.¹⁶ Actually, Version B in the rendering by Genesios is to be given more credit than Version A, considering that if any mission by the Persians to seek a royal heir in Constantinople ever took place, a previous understanding with the emperor was needed. How could secret Persian agents expect not to be noticed at all when roaming around Constantinople and questioning the people about the son of a Persian nobleman?

But this minor detail is certainly not the only point in the whole story that should be approached with caution. Is it really conceivable that Persian envoys would take so much trouble to find a youth, however noble his father might have been? What could have made any noble Persian youth so important to them that they even promised to submit to the empire in exchange for him? That Theophobos’ father was a descendant of the Great Cyrus, as was perhaps maintained in the original report of the Version B preserved in Genesios,¹⁷ is such nonsense that the Continuator suppressed this point in his rendering of the passage. The whole story seems so unlikely and absurd at first sight that Henri Grégoire rejected it at once as the fancy product of an imaginative monk of the monastery founded by Theophobos in his last years.

However, there is an interesting aspect to the story that seems to have escaped the notice of scholars and probably explains the changes made by the Continuator

¹³ Gen. III.3 (37.32–38.48)

¹⁴ Th. Cont. III.19 (110.17–111.6).

¹⁵ Gen. III.4 (39.70–40.1)

¹⁶ Th. Cont. III.20 (111.21–112.3)

¹⁷ Gen. III.4 (39.92–94).

in the rendering of the two versions of Theophobos' origins. I refer to the fact that Version B by Genesisios says that Theophobos was 12 years old when he was found by the Persian envoys.¹⁸ The Continuator suppressed this detail in his short summary of Version B. It deserves our attention here, firstly because it appears in connection with the official embassy by the Persians to the emperor that we have already considered more likely than the clandestine mission outlined in Version A. Moreover, Genesisios says in his second version that Theophilos took charge of the education of the child. According to the editor, the passage is as follows:

ὁ αὐτοκράτωρ ... τὸν μὲν Θεόφοβον ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις ἐσκήνωσεν ἀνατροφῆς τε προσηκούσης καὶ τῆς κατὰ μαθητείαν ἡξίου παιδεύσεως· ὁ δὲ φύσεως εὐκληρία, οὐχ ἦττον δὲ καὶ μεγαλοπρεπεία συνδιαιτώμενος, (εἰς ἄκρον ἦκεν ἐλλογίμου παιδεύσεως, ὡς ἐντεῦθεν παρὰ τῷ βασιλεῖ πλείστα στεργόμενος εὐμοιρῆσαι πατρικιότητα, δορυφορίας τε καὶ σεβασμιότητος περιδόξων, ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ τῆς κατὰ θεραπείαν πολυτελοῦς καὶ ικανωτάτης *** ἐφάμασθαι. διὰ τοι τοῦτο ὁ μὲν βασιλεὺς τοὺς Πέρσας ἐκ τούτου ὡς νεανικούς ἐν πολέμοις καὶ μεγαλόφρονας ἐπιστάμενος τοῖς στρατιωτικοῖς ἀναγράφεται κώδιξιν, καὶ τούτοις Περσικὸν σύλλογον ἐγκατέστησεν, καὶ αὐτοὺς ταῖς Ῥωμαϊκαῖς στρατοπεδαρχίαις συνηριθμηθῆσθαι προσέταξεν.¹⁹

In the translation by Kaldellis:

The emperor installed Theophobos in the palace and arranged that he be provided for and educated in a fitting manner. Because of his natural advantages, and no less due to the magnificence of his new environment, Theophobos reached the heights of eloquence and learning. Consequently the emperor, who became quite fond of him, bestowed upon him the dignity of a patrikios, along with a large retinue and illustrious honours, and also a luxurious and most adequate life style. Hence the emperor realized by observing Theophobos that the Persians were vigorous and high-minded warriors, and had them enrolled in the military lists, forming from them a Persian corps, which he incorporated into the Roman armies.²⁰

The sequence of events adopted in this passage is completely different from that adopted in Genesisios' Version A, where Theophilos appoints Theophobos patrikios and enrolls the Persians in the Roman army after the Persian envoys ask for Theophobos from the emperor. In Version A of Genesisios there is no mention at all of Theophobos being educated in the palace. Neither is the age of Theophobos mentioned here, although the fact that Genesisios describes him twice as νεανίας and depicts him living with his mother makes one suspect that Theophobos was

¹⁸ Gen. III.4 (39.90).

¹⁹ Gen. III.4 (40.4–14). There is a corruption in the text I try to solve when reconsidering the passage in Chapter 12.3.

²⁰ Kaldellis (1998) 53.

more a child than a youth. There is in fact no contradiction between the two versions in *Genesis*, provided that we consider that Version B has only given us more details about the promotion and career of Theophobos since he entered the imperial palace as a child, whereas the first has summed up the process by mentioning only his appointment as patrikios.

This could be precisely the reason for the amendments made by the Continuator in the rendering of the two accounts that he tried to combine into a single narrative, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere.²¹ The Continuator followed Version A when he described the finding of Theophobos by the Persians on a secret mission, but then did not proceed to mention the coming of the Persian troops to the empire and the appointment of Theophobos as patrikios, events that make up the remainder of Version A in *Genesis*' narrative. He preferred instead to mention briefly the fact that Theophobos was raised in the palace and educated in Greek culture:

ἐγεγήθει γοῦν τοῖς ὑποσχεθεῖσιν ὁ βασιλεὺς, καὶ ἐπεὶπερ οὕτως ἔχουσιν εὑρίσκει τὴν ἀλήθειαν, ἐν βασιλείοις τοῦτον ἀλιζέσθαι καὶ κατασκηνοῦν ποιεῖ, μαθήμασί τε καὶ παιδείᾳ ἐπιμελούμενον.²²

The emperor rejoiced at these promises; and because he found this to be the truth, he caused him to live and dwell in the palace and took care of his lessons and education.

The Continuator took these details borrowed from Version B, as he thought that the education of Theophobos in the palace must necessarily have preceded his appointment as patrikios. However, his account turns out to be misleading because he does not then proceed to narrate the coming of the Persian troops and the appointment of Theophobos as patrikios according to Version A, but includes in a sort of parenthesis the alternative account of Version B about the finding of Theophobos by the official embassy of the Persians, and this in an extremely abbreviated fashion, as we have said. Only after that does the Continuator resume Version A and give us accurate details about the coming of the Persians to the empire and the titles and position Theophobos held by this time. We can describe his procedure more accurately as follows (note that many transitions in the use of the sources are marked in the Continuator by the use of γοῦν):

Version A (Th. Cont. 110.7–111.6 = Gen. 37.16–38.45): Theophobos is born in Constantinople of a Persian nobleman and an unnamed woman. After that, the father leaves the city. But his Persian countrymen are looking for a leader of noble descent and Theophobos' father directs their search to his own son in Constantinople. They secretly enter the city and find there the woman with the

²¹ Signes Codoñer (1995) 461–89.

²² Th. Cont. III.19 (111.6–9).

youth in the district of Oxeia. They reveal their purpose to the emperor and promise to become his subjects if he delivers Theophobos to them.

Version B (Th. Cont. 111.6–111.9 = Gen. 40.3–6): Theophilos rejoices at their promises and takes care of Theophobos, who is educated at the imperial palace.

Version B (Th. Cont. 111.10–112.3 = Gen. 38.62–39.75): The Continuator warns us about the existence of another version of events that is somewhat different. According to this version, a noble Persian fled his country and came to Constantinople where he worked for a barmaid for some time. After he married her, she conceived a child, who was named Theophobos. After the father died, the existence of the child was revealed to the Persians by signs in the sky. As soon as they heard of it, they went to the city. Theophobos became known to the emperor after they found him.

Version A (Cont. 112.3–112.21 = Gen. 38.45–61): When notice of the events taking place in Constantinople reached Persia, the inhabitants decided to break their allegiance to the caliph and submit to the empire. Bābak the leader of the Persians had already rebelled against the Arabs five years before and now went to Sinope to meet Theophobos (Theophobos' father, according to Genesis), submitting himself and all his people to the emperor. Theophilos appointed Theophobos patrikios and married him to his sister. Theophilos also married the Persians to Byzantine women and enrolled them in the imperial army.

As we see, the Continuator tried to rationalize and combine his sources into a single narrative by considering that Theophobos would have been raised at the palace (Version B) before he was appointed patrikios and was respected both by the emperor and the Persian troops (Version A). This means that the Continuator also thought that Theophobos was a child when the Persian envoys found him in Oxeia living with his mother. Accordingly, Theophobos must have been a child if Theophilos raised him in the palace and his education must have taken place some time before he was named patrikios. If this is the case, perhaps we can suppose that the embassy of the Persians took place not when Theophobos was a child, but after he had been effectively taught the Byzantine curriculum and was highly regarded in the eyes of Theophilos. His achieved eloquence, surely in Greek, could not have been gained otherwise.

In fact, it is certain that there were embassies from the Persian Khurramites to Constantinople during their uprising against the caliphate, as we have already seen when considering the biography of Naṣr. Contacts may even have started long before the uprising had begun, as backing from the empire was indeed crucial for long-term success of the rebellion. Neither should the possibility of contact taking place during the war between Thomas and Michael be ruled out. Thomas had indeed gained strong support from the Arabs (see Chapter 13.2) and many peoples of the Caucasus and eastern Anatolia (see Chapter 2.3), so that every

possible alliance with the peoples of this area, including the Persians, would have been extremely welcome to Michael of Amorion, who retained control only of the west. Alternatively, contact with the Persians may have started in the aftermath of the civil war, when Michael was trying to assert his authority in the east. It is even probable that the Persians who visited the court promised to submit to the empire if only Theophilus would help them in their fight against the caliph. The Roman court, following a long tradition, must have then taken hostages from these ambassadors in order to assure their loyalty.

This policy was already practiced by the Romans in the time of the Republic when many Greek intellectuals (the most famous being Polybios) were thus won over to the cause of Rome, but it became customary in the imperial period.²³ The usual procedure was to keep the hostages, normally prominent persons of royal or noble blood or their relatives, at the court. It was not even unusual to take care of the children of these people and allow them to be educated in the Roman culture. It was hoped that these “Romanized” children, after they grew up, would always promote the cause of Rome in their respective countries.²⁴ The practice continued in Byzantium, especially with the peoples of the Balkans (the most notorious examples are Theodoric the Great and Symeon of Bulgaria) and in the Caucasian principalities, whose borders with the empire remained unstable.²⁵

I find it clarifies the picture to connect the story of Theophobos with this Roman policy and consider him a hostage of the empire. It does not really matter if Theophobos was born in Constantinople of a prominent Persian or was given to the emperor as a child to guarantee an alliance between the Persians and Byzantines. What really matters is the fact that he was given to the emperor to ensure that the mutual alliance between the Persians and Byzantines should remain. That he

²³ Lee (1991) 366 describes this policy of the Romans in the following terms: “Hostage-taking gave the Romans the opportunity to expose potential future leaders of a neighbouring people to Roman cultural influence over a significant and formative period of time, in the expectation that at some time after their return home, these young men were likely to hold positions of power and would be inclined to favour Roman interests.” Certainly, the author emphasizes the fact that the Roman Empire apparently did not follow this practice with Persian Sassanids in the fourth–sixth centuries, but only exchanged hostages as guarantees for short periods of time. However, he explains this anomaly as a consequence of some kind of recognition of equality between the two main powers, a circumstance that does not apply in our case. Moreover, there are clear instances of political refugees coming from Sassanid Persia and being instrumental to Roman strategy, like the famous Hormisdas, son of the Persian king Hormisdas II, who fled to the empire, was awarded with many honours by the emperor Constantine I and ended in Roman ranks fighting the Sassanids (*PLRE* vol. 1, s.v. “Hormisdas 1”). See for that Vallejo Girvés (2004), with further bibliography.

²⁴ The same goes occasionally for the Arabs, who protected Byzantine dissidents in their territory and used them against Constantinople, as the case of the “renegade” Thomas the Slav will show in Chapter 13.1.

²⁵ For the integration of Armenian princely houses in the Byzantine aristocracy during the ninth century see Brousselle (1996) and in general Chapters 3–7.

was educated in the Roman traditions and given in marriage to a member of the imperial family was the logical corollary of this policy.²⁶

11.2 The Identity of Theophobos' Father

We must accordingly surmise that the father of Theophobos was a very prominent Persian acting as an agent of their people at the imperial court, otherwise the handing over of his son to the emperor could not have had any relevance. Unfortunately the Byzantine sources do not give us his name. This is easily explained as the Greek sources focused naturally on the “Romanized” child Theophobos. The identity of his father, however important he could have been in his own country, was secondary for a Greek reader a century after the events. It could also be that the *Lives* of Theophobos played down the figure of the father, as his bad reputation could compromise the eulogy of the son. However, if the father was to play a significant role in the alliance between Byzantines and Khurramites, we should perhaps expect to find some mention of him in the oriental sources.

As I conjectured years ago, Naṣr the Khurramite is a good candidate to fill this post.²⁷ He was a close confidant of Bābak, the Persian leader, and set off for Byzantium before the same Bābak tried to do so. He could have been sent to Constantinople in earlier embassies during the first years of the reign of Theophilos, or even under Michael II (when Theophilos was co-emperor) and have left his son there as hostage of the Byzantines. His later position as *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* at the head of the Persian troops is also relevant, as he could not have held this high command without enjoying the close confidence of the emperor. Previous nominees for this post did indeed become emperors afterwards, like Leo V and perhaps Michael II. It would have been quite strange for Theophilos to appoint a Persian emigrant *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* immediately after he entered Byzantine territory, probably in 834. Confidence comes with time, but Naṣr was probably holding this post when the Persian troops campaigned for the first time in Armenian lands in 834, as we shall see in Chapter 16. If we suppose that the son of Naṣr was already married to a sister of Theophilos when his father settled in Byzantium, then we have the link we are looking for. Finally, whereas the Greek sources mentioned a father of Theophobos, we have already seen in

²⁶ Marriages of princely scions of foreign dynasties to the imperial family were not infrequent in Byzantium. The clearest precedent in time was the marriage of Constantine V with the daughter of the Chagan of the Khazars in 732 (see Theoph. 409–10), a fact that contributed to the alliance between the Byzantines and Khazars, which we deal with in Chapters 19–20 for the reign of Theophilos. This policy was condemned by Constantine VII in the famous chapter 13 of *De administrando imperio* after Romanos I Lakapenos had married the daughter of his son Christopher to the Bulgarian Tzar in 927.

²⁷ Signes Codoñer (1995) 461–5. Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 408, note 160 refer to my hypothesis without quoting my study.

Chapter 10.1 that Michael the Syrian mentioned a son of Naṣr who was important enough for the caliph to demand that he be handed over to the emperor. That this son could have been Theophobos is more than a probability.

It is interesting to note that when Bābak arrived in Sinope to submit his people to the emperor, the Continuator says that he came to Byzantium “out of longing for Theophobos” (πόθῳ τῷ πρὸς τὸν Θεόφοβον), whereas Genesios mentions that he was instead looking for his father (ἀνερευνῶν τὸν Θεοφόβου πατέρα).²⁸ This later precision may be understood now in the sense that it was Naṣr whom Bābak was looking for, that is to say, the general who probably left him for the west in 834 when the situation was getting worse for the Khurramites in Azerbaijan. However, since we know that Bābak was captured by the caliph in 837 and subsequently put to death in Sāmarrā, it is generally assumed that he never came to Byzantium. I would not completely rule out the possibility that such a meeting took place, perhaps in 835, before Theophilos’ campaign in western Armenia (see Chapter 16.4). But perhaps it was not Bābak himself who came to Sinope, but some of his envoys who submitted to the emperor on behalf of their leader. Naṣr could have even been the person who came to Sinope with his men, this event thus taking place in 834. Greek sources might have easily confused the leader with the lieutenant.

Be this as it may, the current idea, advanced first by Grégoire²⁹ and accepted until now by all scholars,³⁰ that the Theophobos of the Greeks and the Naṣr of the oriental sources were one and the same person must be discarded. Whoever wrote the eulogy or hagiography of Theophobos could not have changed so blatantly the events and have made of an aged Khurramite leader in Azerbaijan (he had a son according to Michael the Syrian) a young son born in Constantinople and educated in the imperial palace. One could perhaps argue, again following Grégoire, that the hagiographers also made Manuel the Armenian live well into the regency of Theodora despite being already dead in 838, and that in so doing they heavily distorted the truth. But even if this supposition holds true,³¹ there was at least a reason to do that, since the hagiographers might have wanted to whitewash the iconoclast past of their hero by giving him a crucial role in the restoration of icon worship. No satisfactory reason can be found, however, for making an aged Khurramite general like Naṣr to be born in Constantinople, and this even in two different versions of his *Life*. Since Naṣr was converted to Christianity, according to some sources, there were many ways of highlighting his piety without completely changing his identity. Unless, of course, we consider that Byzantine authors were just rhetorical fools who wanted to play with facts just for fun.

Moreover, as we have seen in Chapter 10.1, Naṣr’s severed head was sent to the caliph after he died in a pitched battle at the eastern frontier. Theophobos for

²⁸ Th. Cont. III.21 (112.10–11) and Gen. III.3 (38.52–53).

²⁹ Grégoire (1934).

³⁰ See *PmbZ* #8237 and *PBE* s.v. “Theophobos 1”.

³¹ Which appears now to be the case, see Signes Codoñer (2013a).

his part was executed by Theophilos in Constantinople, as we shall see below in Chapter 12, because the emperor suspected him of conspiring to gain the throne. These are indeed two completely different reports, impossible to match in the biography of a single person. On the contrary, these reports wholly agree with what we independently know about the lives of Naṣr and Theophobos, for the experienced Khurramite general died on the battlefield, whereas Theophobos did so in the palace, according to the more symbolic role as leader of the Persians he is given by the sources. In the different versions of the battle of Anzes preserved by Byzantine historians, Theophobos never appears as a military leader, as we have already seen in Chapter 8.2, where we noticed the sharp contrast with the figure of Manuel, who fights next to the emperor sword in hand at the most critical moments. Even in the version most favourable towards Theophobos, as preserved by the Continuator, he only counsels the emperor to join the ranks and to set upon the enemy by night together with the Persian infantry. When the battle is over, Theophilos rewarded “with thanks and especially with honours *the men of Theophobos*” (χάρισι δὲ καὶ τιμαῖς διαφερόντως τοὺς περὶ τὸν Θεόφοβον), but not Theophobos himself.³²

Furthermore, we know that when Theophobos was executed, he was buried in the monastery he had founded in the capital. Since Naṣr’s salted head according to Michael the Syrian was sent to the caliph after his death at the frontier,³³ Grégoire conjectured that the monks of this monastery forged the story of his death in the capital only in order to claim that his body be buried in their church. This again makes no sense, for the monks would have thus substituted execution as a traitor in the palace for a valiant death as a fighter at the frontier! Perhaps they wanted to stress that Theophobos opposed Theophilos, but our sources say no word about Theophobos’ iconophilia. If the monks really needed the remains of the founder in their monastery, they could have easily concocted another story about their (miraculous?) transfer from the frontier. The fact that Theophilos ordered the beheading of Theophobos remains therefore the only link between the death of Theophobos and Naṣr that Grégoire was able to find.

Finally, it is certainly possible that a Khurramite rebel like Naṣr and many of his men chose outward conversion to Christianity when their situation was increasingly desperate in Azerbaijan and the emperor offered them his help. But I do not think that they could have done more than pay lip service to the emperor, as we argued in Chapter 9. Nor is it conceivable that Naṣr founded a monastery.

Therefore it may be assumed without any doubt that Naṣr and Theophobos were two different persons. It appears to me that there is a strong possibility that Naṣr was Theophobos’ father, although it cannot be completely ruled out that the latter was another Khurramite leader not named in the sources.

³² Th. Cont. III.22 (113.5–8 and 114.10–12).

³³ Mich. Syr. 537, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 96.

11.3 Theophobos Patrician and Kaisar and his Marriage to Theophilos' Family

The Continuator says that as a consequence of the submission of Bābak's men to the empire, "Theophilos enrolled Theophobos in the ranks of the patricians and gave him his own sister in marriage" (τόν τε Θεόφοβον ὁ Θεόφιλος τιμῇ τῇ πατρικίων ἐναριθμεῖ, καὶ τῇ ἑαυτοῦ ἀδελφῇ πρὸς γάμον ἐκδίδωσι).³⁴ When introducing the different reports on Theophobos, the Continuator had already stated that he would tell "how, being of Persian descent, he became known to the emperor and took his sister to wife" (τὴν ἀδελφὴν αὐτοῦ εἰς γάμον ἤρμόσατο).³⁵

Genesios, for his part, in a first version about the origins of Theophobos, tells us that "the emperor Theophilos raised the noble youth Theophobos to the rank of a patrikios and gave him his own sister in marriage" (ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς Θεόφιλος τὸν μὲν εὐγενῆ νεανίαν Θεόφοβον καταγεραίνει πατρικιότητι καὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀδελφὴν τούτῳ πρὸς γάμον ἐκδίδωσιν).³⁶ This is presented again as a consequence of the Persians having become Roman subjects. In a second version, however, Genesios mentions that the emperor educated Theophobos at the palace and "consequently the emperor, who became quite fond of him, bestowed upon him the dignity of a patrikios, so that he could also partake, along with the illustrious of both retinue and honours, of a luxurious life style most adequate to his attendance" (ὡς ἐντεῦθεν παρὰ τῷ βασιλεῖ πλεῖστα στεργόμενος εὐμοιρῆσαι πατρικιότητα, δоруφορίας τε καὶ σεβασμιότητος περιδόξων, ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ <διαί>της κατὰ θεραπείαν πολυτελοῦς καὶ ἰκανωτάτης ἐφάμασθαι).³⁷



Figure 2 Seal of Theophobos as patrikios. Nr. 4 in the Dunn catalogue (1983). Courtesy of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

³⁴ Th. Cont. III.21 (112.13–15).

³⁵ Th. Cont. III.19 (110.5–7).

³⁶ Gen. III.3 (38.57–58).

³⁷ Gen. III.4 (40.7–10). The text is problematic, for a substantive is lacking for πολυτελοῦς καὶ ἰκανωτάτης. I follow the conjecture of Kumaniecki.

A seal of the Barber Institute of Birmingham (Figure 2), dated to the ninth century, confirms that Theophobos was appointed patrikios.³⁸ This appointment probably had something to do with the arrival of the Persian Khurramites, although Theophilus could have discovered the importance of the Persian youth well before the Khurramites accepted Roman rule. The education of Theophobos at the palace could therefore have been part of a strategy that aimed at the recognition of his rights by the Persian rebels.

It is more problematic to assess Theophobos' marriage. To begin with, the Logothete says that Theophobos married a sister of Theodora.³⁹ This indication, which could perhaps be explained as an error of the Logothete, certainly stands alone against the joint statement of the Continuator and Genesisios that the wife was a sister of Theophilus. Nevertheless, as these two historians use a common source as their base, we are not able to decide in favour of one or other possibility just by considering which is the more frequent testimony. Modern scholars are also divided on this point.⁴⁰

We cannot further explore the option of the marriage of Theophobos with a sister of Theophilus, for no record of the existence of such a sister has been preserved. About Theodora's sisters we are better informed, but nowhere is it stated that one of them ever married Theophobos. In a much-debated passage, the Continuator says that the empress had three sisters but he only mentions two of them, Kalomaria and Sophia. In the only manuscript of the work, Vat gr. 167, a blank space follows their names. The Continuator further specifies that Sophia was married to Constantine Baboutzikos and Kalomaria to Arsaber, who is presented as the brother of Eirene, the mother of the future patriarch Photios.⁴¹ Skylitzes, based on this text, mentions Eirene as the third sister and says that Sophia was married to Constantine Baboutzikos and Kalomaria to Arsaber, but he also adds that the third sister Eirene married Sergios, brother of Photios.⁴² It is difficult to know whether Skylitzes improved the text of the Continuator based on other sources, had access to a better manuscript of this work than the Vat gr. 167, or simply freely misrepresented the facts.⁴³ But if we suppose that the name of Theodora's third daughter was somehow erased from the source of the Continuator, as a kind

³⁸ Dunn (1983) 4. Archie Dunn, who is preparing an edition of the seals at the Barber Institute, has confirmed this dating to me.

³⁹ Log. (A) *Theophilus* [130] 8 (218.43–44): αὐτὸν δὲ τὸν Θεόφοβον εἰς ἀδελφὴν Θεοδώρας ἀγούστης γαμβρὸν εἰσεποιήσατο.

⁴⁰ Treadgold (1988) note 386 and *PBE* s.v. “Anonyma 4” consider that Theophobos married a sister of Theodora, whereas *PmbZ* #2547 maintains that the wife of Theophobos was rather a sister of Theophilus.

⁴¹ Th. Cont. IV.22 (174.23–175.11).

⁴² Skyl., *Michael III* 11 (98.69–77).

⁴³ For a discussion about the problem of Theodora's sisters see Bury (1890), Ahrweiler (1965), Mango (1977), Settiani (2006) 169–72 and 340–42, Varona Codeso (2009a) 343–8 and (2009b) 125–8.

of *damnatio memoriae*,⁴⁴ the possibility remains that this third (unnamed) sister did in fact marry Theophobos: her name would have been erased from the official records after her husband was executed by Theophilos.⁴⁵ This is undoubtedly a highly conjectural hypothesis, which does not explain whence Skylitzes got the name of Eirene or why he made her marry Sergios. If we do not accept this suggestion, then we will have no other alternative than to suppose that Theophobos married a sister of Theophilos.

We must also consider the age of Theophobos. If, according to Genesios, he was aged 12 when Theophilos brought him to the palace,⁴⁶ he could only have married two years later, when he reached the canonical age of 14. This would make 831 the first possible year for a marriage of Theophobos to the imperial family. Nevertheless, as Theophilos had been co-emperor since 821, it is not to be excluded that Theophobos entered the palace before, as we suggested above in section 11.1. This point has some relevance. Since Theophilos could not have been born later than 805/806,⁴⁷ a younger sister of his born from 5 to 10 years later, c. 810–815, could have reached the canonical age for marriage (12 for women) in 822–827. A marriage between her and Theophobos is therefore conceivable, although she could have been a bit older than the groom. The same can be said of Theodora's sisters.

It was otherwise with the children of the imperial couple. Theodora and Theophilos married in 821, as we established in Chapter 4, so that their children were very small or even babies when Theophilos came to the throne in 829. As we argued in Chapter 7, Alexios Mousele could not have been betrothed to the youngest of Theophilos' daughters before 837–838. This excludes him from being the *kaisar* of the triumph of 831, as we have seen. While waiting for their children to grow older, Theophilos probably planned marriages of his and his wife's sisters to significant families. Marriage policy has always been a common means of obtaining allies to boost power, and Theophilos, as a young ruler, needed this support to consolidate his rule and, most important, to ensure dynastic continuity. In any case, as Theophobos is said to have had children in 838, when he took flight to Amastris, it is reasonable to date his marriage as early as possible under Theophilos.⁴⁸

It is against this background that we must consider Theophilos' appointment of a *kaisar* at the beginning of his reign, for he is already mentioned in the protocol of his triumph in 831 (see Chapter 15.2). The appointment of a *kaisar* would have been urgent in 831, for the only son of Theophilos, the co-emperor Constantine,

⁴⁴ In Th. Cont. III.38 (136.2–3) Theophobos appears to be followed by his wife (the text, however, uses the plural: *μετὰ ... γυναικῶν*) when he took flight to Amastris, where the Persians proclaimed him emperor.

⁴⁵ Signes Codoñer (1995) 483.

⁴⁶ Gen. III.4 (39.90).

⁴⁷ *PmbZ* #8167 (p. 629).

⁴⁸ Th. Cont. III.38 (136.2–3).

may have already died in this year (see Chapter 7.2). The emperor urgently needed to present an alternative to the succession, especially as he was campaigning on the distant eastern frontier. The appointment of a kaisar from among the members of the imperial family was undoubtedly the most convenient option, for the elected kaisar, without being made heir to the throne, could eventually take the reins of power if the emperor suddenly died without offspring. If Theophilos did not appoint a kaisar before departing for the east in the spring of 831, he certainly was obliged to make a decision before entering the city in triumph upon his return. The protocol of 831 pays especial and detailed attention to the garments of the emperor and the kaisar when both entered the city through the Golden Gate riding on two white horses,⁴⁹ whereas it makes only marginal comments about the *klibania* worn by the other dignitaries taking part in the triumphant procession. It could be that Theophilos appointed the new kaisar only for the occasion of his triumphal return. According to the protocol, Theophilos waited seven days in Hiereia and three more days in Saint Mamas before entering the city in triumph,⁵⁰ probably because he was waiting for the arrival of the prisoners of war who were to be paraded through the streets during the procession. Could he have appointed the new kaisar in the meantime? The protocol does not say whether the kaisar campaigned with Theophilos or not; he just appears on horseback at his side when both are to enter the city through the Golden Gate.

Who was the appointed kaisar?⁵¹ Since Theophilos' daughters were too young to be married (or even betrothed!) and the emperor apparently lacked a brother, the only possible choice was to appoint as kaisar one of Theophilos' brothers-in-law. Theophobos was certainly the most likely candidate. That no scholar has thought of him for the post is easily explained because of the hitherto prevailing identification of Theophobos with the Khurramite general Naṣr. The appointment as kaisar of a Persian emigrant with probably no knowledge of Greek culture and Byzantine traditions would certainly have appeared not just highly unpalatable to the Constantinopolitan elites or the Byzantine population in general, but would have represented political suicide for a young emperor claiming to assert his power. Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter 10.1, Naṣr did not come to the empire before 834.

But these considerations do not apply to the figure of Theophobos. We have quoted the sources where his highly sophisticated education at the palace is mentioned. According to Genesios, he "reached the heights of eloquence and learning".⁵² He was accordingly more Roman than barbarian and, in any case, more Roman than the rude Armenian soldier, Leo V, or the ignorant Phrygian, Michael of Amorion. Both the Continuator and Genesios explain the predilection

⁴⁹ Constantine VII, *Three treatises* 148.837–844.

⁵⁰ Constantine VII, *Three treatises* 146.825–826.

⁵¹ I sincerely thank Otto Kresten for some suggestions and comments made on this particular question, from which the following discussion has highly benefited.

⁵² Gen. III.4 (40.7). See also Th. Cont. III.19 (111.9).

Theophilos felt for the youth as a consequence of his being raised in the palace. When Theophilos appointed him patrikios and married him to his (if not Theodora's) sister, he was surely conceiving for him a promising future, exactly as when some years later he married his youngest daughter to Alexios Mousele and appointed him patrikios.

Obviously the main objection for supposing that Theophobos was the kaisar of 831 is the fact that no single source makes mention of him being appointed as such. However, it is only by coincidence that we have the very fundamental information that Alexios Mousele was appointed kaisar by Theophilos. The Continuator is the only historian to mention this highly significant detail because he probably read the whole *cursus honorum* of Alexios from an inscription written on his tomb.⁵³ That Alexios was appointed kaisar is however completely ignored by the Logothete, who devotes a lengthy chapter to him and his supposed conspiracy against the emperor.⁵⁴ This silence may appear strange, for if Alexios ever pretended to the throne, it was not only because he was the son-in-law of the emperor, but also because of his role of kaisar and man-in-reserve in case of Theophilos' death. Nevertheless, his appointment as patrikios and magistros as well as his being sent to Italy on campaign was apparently more important to the Logothete. The same could have been the case with Theophobos.

The fall into disgrace of Theophobos (executed by the emperor for high treason), was more dramatic than that of Alexios Mousele (retired to a monastery but apparently reconciled with Theophilos), and this may explain a certain *damnatio memoriae*, perhaps extended to the name of his wife, as we have suggested above. Finally, unlike Alexios, Theophobos may have quickly exchanged the title of kaisar for one of even higher importance, which makes his former status of kaisar irrelevant for later historians. We will consider this point in the next section.

11.4 Theophobos Exousiastes of the Persians

An interesting lead seal with the name of Theophobos has been preserved in the Dumbarton Oaks collection with the number 58.106.3767 (Figure 3). Its last editors⁵⁵ correctly read in its reverse τῷ σῷ δούλῳ Θεοφύβῳ ἐξουσιαστῇ τ(ῶν) [Π]ερσῶν (four lines), “[Lord (or Mother of God) help] your servant Theophobos, exousiastes of the Persians”. They dated it to the 830s, against the false reading Χερσῶνος of Zacos and Veglery,⁵⁶ already corrected by Werner Seibt.⁵⁷

⁵³ As we saw in Chapter 7.2, Th. Cont. III.18 (109.12–13) says that Alexios' “tomb and the inscribed image of him above it” (τὸν τάφον καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ ἄνωθεν ἐπιγεγραμμένην εἰκόνα) bear witness of what the historian has recounted (μάρτυρα ... τῶν λεγομένων).

⁵⁴ Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 11–14 (219.66–220.103).

⁵⁵ McGeer, Nesbitt and Oikonomides (2005) n° 108.1, p. 146.

⁵⁶ Zacos and Veglery (1972–1985) n° 2526, p. 1367.

⁵⁷ Seibt (1975) 212.



Figure 3 Seal of Theophobos as ἐξουσιαστής τῶν Περσῶν from McGeer, Nesbitt and Oikonomides (2005)

Since Seibt's correction it has been generally assumed that this seal belonged to Theophobos, thus confirming that he was the commander of the Persian troops under Theophilos. But leaving aside the fact that the post of *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* held by Naṣr does not match with this title (see Chapter 10.2), the term *exousiastēs* (ἐξουσιαστής) could hardly have been used for a military commander serving the empire, as we shall now see.

We find in *De cerimoniis* II.46 that *exousiastēs* is one of the titles by which foreign rulers are addressed by the Byzantine emperor (οἷς ὀφείλει ὁ βασιλεὺς ὀνόμασι τιμᾶν τοῖς μεγιστάσι καὶ πρώτοις τῶν ἐθνῶν). Indeed, among the many titles and names listed in this chapter, the term *exousiastēs* occupies the third place. But which rulers are envisaged here? We have the answer some pages below, in *De cerimoniis* II.48, where we find an “*exousiastēs* of Alania” (ἐξουσιαστής Ἀλανίας), a “renowned *exousiastēs* of Abasgia” (περιφανὴς ἐξουσιαστής Ἀβασγίας) and an “most respected and noble *exousiastēs* of the Muslims” (ἐνδοξότατος καὶ εὐγενέστατος ἐξουσιαστής τῶν Μουσουλμητῶν).⁵⁸ In *De administrando imperio* the address “*exousiastēs* of Abasgia” (ἐξουσιαστής Ἀβασγίας) is found six times.⁵⁹ Nicholas I Mystikos uses the expression “*exousiastēs* of Abasgia” ([περίδοχος] ἐξουσιαστής Ἀβασγίας) three times in the letters addressed to this ruler.⁶⁰ Skylitzes speaks also of “Pankratios the *exousiastēs* of Abasgia” (Παγκρατίου δὲ τοῦ ἐξουσιαστοῦ Ἀβασγίας).⁶¹ Anna Komnene addresses the emir of Baghdad as “*exousiastēs* of Babylon” (ἐξουσιαστής Βαβυλῶνος).⁶² Some more examples

⁵⁸ *De cerimoniis* II.48 (688.6, 9–10 and 689.17–18).

⁵⁹ *De administrando imperio* 45–46.

⁶⁰ Nicholas Mystikos, *Letters* nr. 46, 51 and 162.

⁶¹ Skyl., *Michael IV Paphlagon* 14 (402.6).

⁶² Anna Komnene, *Alexias* XI.7.

could perhaps be found, but nowhere is the term *exousiastēs* used for a Byzantine commander or officer. It is only exceptionally given to the emperor when describing the nature of his power, for example by the grammarian Choeroboskos in his *Epimerismoi to the Psalms* (168):⁶³ Βασιλεὺς μὲν ἐστὶν ὁ ἐξουσιαστῆς καὶ κατὰ νόμους ἄρχων τῶν ἀρχομένων (“the emperor is the *exousiastēs* and he who rules over the subjects according to the laws”). This last use proves that the term was employed without exception for sovereign rulers, mainly of the Caucasus area, and also incidentally for the ruler of Baghdad or the emperor himself.

What then could the term ἐξουσιαστῆς τῶν Περσῶν mean when viewed in this context? I think that the only likely explanation is that Theophobos intended Theophobos not to command over the Persian troops serving Byzantium, but to rule over the Persians in their own country, probably meaning Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. The education provided to Theophobos at the imperial court aimed to make of him a pro-Roman ruler and prepared him for a future takeover of power. The Byzantine chancellery followed this policy with many other Caucasian rulers, who owned their own diplomatic houses in Constantinople. Theophilos’ aim might today seem unrealistic, but if we consider the troubles the caliphate had in assessing his power in the Caucasus area, the possibility of establishing a Persian principality allied to Byzantium could then have seemed feasible, at least before the Khurramites were utterly defeated by the caliph in 837.

If we now turn our attention to the Greek literary sources, we can find in them more evidence confirming our supposition. Genesisios says that after Theophobos helped Theophilos in a pitched battle, the emperor wanted him to “rule among the Persians” (ἡγεμονεύειν ἐν Πέρσαις τὸν Θεόφοβον προτεθύμητο). This means at least that Theophobos was not appointed commander of the Persian troops from the very beginning. But what could have been meant by “among the Persians” (ἐν Πέρσαις)? Genesisios uses the verb ἡγεμονεύω a second time to refer to a command of troops.⁶⁴ But there are no more samples of this use of ἡγεμονεύω in Genesisios, and even in this second case we have a genitive rection. The same expression occurs in the Continuator, again with a genitive rection: “the emperor wished that Theophobos should rule them” (διὸ καὶ ὁ βασιλεὺς ἡγεμονεύειν αὐτῶν ἐβούλετο τὸν Θεόφοβον).⁶⁵ This is the only instance of ἡγεμονεύω in the first five books of the Continuator, who uses another verb to refer to a military command. The verb ἡγεμονεύω no doubt appeared in the common source both writers used for their narratives.

I suspect that the original wording of the phrase was similar to that of Genesisios, with a locative ἐν Πέρσαις instead of a genitive τῶν Περσῶν. The locative ἐν Πέρσαις is indeed a very twisted form of referring to a military command, even for such a baroque writer as Genesisios. On the contrary, Genesisios, by using a phrase like ἡγεμονεύειν ἐν Πέρσαις, nicely expressed the idea that Theophilos thought of

⁶³ Ed. Gaisford (1842).

⁶⁴ Gen. IV.15 (68.3–4): αὐτὸν ἀπάσης τῆς στρατιᾶς ἡγεμονεύειν προσέταξεν.

⁶⁵ Th. Cont. III.22 (114. 16).

Theophobos as future ruler of the Persians (meaning the Khurramite Persians of Azerbaijan). The verb ἡγεμονεύω renders quite well the idea of a sovereign ruler that was precisely the sense ἐξουσιαστής had in the contemporary sources, as we have already seen.

Immediately after this passage Genesios tells us how Theophilus was forced to hurry back to Constantinople for some serious matter, probably when he was campaigning in Anatolia.⁶⁶ Theophilus then “handed over to Theophobos the military command to dispose of the Persian troops, but ordered him to return afterwards to the imperial city” (τῷ δὲ Θεοφύβῳ τὰ τῶν Περσῶν ἐγκεχειρικότος διαθέσθαι στρατηγικῶς τὰ στρατεύματα, εἶτα πρὸς τὴν βασιλίδαν τοῦτον ἐπανιέναι κελεύσαντος). The action is not dated in the text, but this last appointment of Theophobos carried with it the end of his brilliant career, as the Persian troops proclaimed him emperor and he lost the confidence of Theophilus. We will turn again to this episode in Chapter 12. For the moment it is enough to say that according to the text the military command Theophobos was given by the emperor was not only episodic but also short-lived. This command seems not to be exactly what Theophilus had in mind when some lines before he was said to have appointed Theophobos ruler of the Persians. Moreover, in the wording of the Continuator it is not expressly said that Theophilus gave any military command to Theophobos, but only that he “ordered him to dispose of the matters of the Persians and to return then to him at all speed” (τῷ Θεοφύβῳ τὰ τῶν Περσῶν ἐνδιαθέσθαι προτρεψάμενος καὶ αὐθις διὰ ταχέων ἐπαναδραμεῖν πρὸς αὐτόν).⁶⁷ We cannot specify what kind of mission was entrusted to Theophobos by reading this passage, as the context of Theophilus’ campaign is unknown to us. It could be that Theophobos received a military command over the Persians (again a temporary one, as he was ordered to return “at all speed” to Constantinople), but it is also possible that Theophobos was ordered to use his prestige to organize (ἐνδιαθέσθαι) the Persian troops. They could have been in disarray following a defeat of the imperial armies and their commanders were perhaps becoming restless. Theophobos was ordered to cope with this situation, but he did not succeed, as the troops openly rebelled afterwards and proclaimed him emperor.

To sum up, there is nothing in the Greek sources that points to a permanent military command of Theophobos over the Persian troops. Theophobos is always depicted as a trustworthy confidant of Theophilus, who keeps him at his side in his military campaigns. He could encourage the emperor to attack the enemy with an inspiring speech, but he never appears to be involved in close fighting, as Manuel does, perhaps because he was too young and was used mainly as a symbolic figure. When the Persian troops are in action, Theophobos does not lead them. This evidence perhaps fits in with the idea that Theophilus reserved a more important role for Theophobos. The emperor probably wanted to appoint him ruler of a Persian principality to the south of the Caucasus, that is to say, ἐξουσιαστής τῶν Περσῶν.

⁶⁶ Gen. III.5 (40.20–24).

⁶⁷ Th. Cont. III.29 (124.14–17).

We do not know when this appointment was made, but it was perhaps in connection with the arrival of the Khurramite Naṣr, the lieutenant of Bābak, to Byzantium in 834 (see Chapter 10.1). The campaigns the Khurramites conducted in western Armenia between 834 and 837 (see Chapters 16–17) were probably under the guidance of their new leader Theophobos in his position of ἐξουσιαστής τῶν Περσῶν and under the military command of (his father) Naṣr. These new circumstances probably made it inconvenient for Theophobos to continue to be addressed as kaisar, for his role at the court had completely changed. He was no longer a possible successor to the emperor, but a key player in Theophilos' foreign policy in the Caucasus. Again, we do not know whether Theophobos was deprived of the title of kaisar or if it simply became obsolete. But it appears certain that Alexios Mousele began his accession in 837–838, as a consequence of his marriage to a daughter of Theophilos. Alexios could have already been the kaisar who took part in the triumph of 837, as we suggested in Chapter 7.2.

Chapter 12

A Persian Basileus?

12.1 Dating the Uprising of the Persians

The final stage of Theophobos' life begins with the defeat of the imperial troops in the battle of Anzes in 838. We will deal at some length in Chapter 18.2 with the circumstances leading to this defeat, known mainly through Arabic sources. Here we will merely review the immediate consequences of the battle for the Byzantines, especially the ensuing uprising of the Persians against the emperor.¹

Genesios, who knew two versions of the life of Theophobos, gives accordingly two different accounts of the rebellion of the Persians under his lead against the emperor Theophilus. In the first one the historian says the following:

[Theophilus] was inclined to appoint Theophobos to rule over the Persians. When, however, for some serious reason (*κατά τινα πρόφασιν διεσπουδακυῖαν*) the emperor was forced to hasten back to the Imperial capital, entrusting Theophobos with putting the Persian contingents in order with the authority of a general (*τῷ δὲ Θεοφύβῳ τὰ τῶν Περσῶν ἐγκεχειρικότος διαθέσθαι στρατηγικῶς τὰ στρατεύματα*) and ordering him to return to the City after that, the Persians, encouraged by a rebellious disposition (*ἐκ στασιόφρονος διαθέσεως*), committed a foolish deed where they were on the littoral of Paphlagonia ... and seized the city of Sinope, or according to others, of Amastris. They surrounded Theophobos and proclaimed him King (*βασιλέα κηρύττουσιν*), quite against his will, hoping thus to revive the past customs of Persia.²

Genesios' second version of events is more detailed about the causes of the rebellion. It is said that "on one occasion" (*κατά τινα περιπέτειαν*), when Theophilus was worsted (*δυστυχίσαντος*) in a military encounter, Theophobos advised him to attack the enemy by night with the Persian troops in order to prevail over the enemy. However, many envious men in the army calumniated him regarding his motives, accusing him of pretending to the throne, so that Theophilus became very angry. Accordingly,

¹ See Signes Codoñer (1995) 550–52 and 553–7 for a discussion on the dating of the revolt of Theophobos, with a more detailed comparison between the accounts of the Continuator and Genesios. See also Treadgold (1979b) 183–4.

² Gen. III.5 (40.20–29), trans. in Kaldellis (1998) 54.

Theophobos became very worried. Taking with him a select group of his followers, he fled to the city of Amastris and awaited the outcome of events there. The emperor sent the fleet against him to seize both the city and Theophobos. The latter, being a pious man, in a God-fearing manner hesitated piously to initiate hostilities that would lead to the spilling of Christian blood.³

Both versions are embedded in the narrative of Theophobos' life and provide no details about when exactly these events took place, for the main concern of Genesios' sources about Theophobos was to build a coherent sequence of episodes around the biography of his hero, not to write some kind of annals about Theophilos' reign. Therefore the sources made it clear that Theophobos rebelled when Theophilos faced some problems either in the capital or after a military defeat, but were not specific about the circumstances and did not provide any dating at all, nor did Genesios try to integrate these two versions into his narrative of Theophilos' reign.

There are many motives to link the events mentioned here with the battle of Anzes of 838. To begin with, the second version of events is what we in Chapter 8.2 labelled as Version C of the Continuator for the battle of Anzes. In this version of the Continuator Manuel the Armenian appears at the side of Theophobos and details are given that unmistakably refer to the well-known defeat of 838.⁴ The Continuator provides some further details not preserved by Genesios (for example about Ibrahim and Abuzachar as the rulers of the Arabs opposing Theophilos), but they are of no help in dating the battle. In any case, the battle is not connected with any previous historical event, but is just a further episode of Theophobos' biography.

On the other hand, Michael the Syrian tells us that when Theophilos was surrounded by Afshīn in 838 (at Anzes, although no name place is given), some of the Roman soldiers took flight to Constantinople, thinking that the emperor had already died. When Theophilos finally succeeded in escaping the enemies who surrounded him, he went hastily to Amorion. But then alarming news came from the capital:

An envoy from his mother⁵ came to him saying that: "The Romans who arrived here have spread a rumour that you had been killed and the nobles want to

³ Gen. III.8 (43.87–92).

⁴ Th. Cont. III.22 (112.22–114.16).

⁵ Theophilos' mother Thekla had died before the second marriage of Michael II with Euphrosyne (see Chapter 6.1) and could not have sent any message to her son in 838. Accordingly, only Theophilos' stepmother Euphrosyne, who is sometimes taken as Theophilos' mother, could be meant here: see *PmbZ* #7259 and *PBE* s.v. "Thekla 2". However, Euphrosyne had been banished from the palace at the beginning of Theophilos' reign (see Chapter 6.2), so that it appears strange at first sight that she could have played an active role in the events as late as 838. Perhaps Theodora was referred to in Michael's source, not as the emperor's wife, but as the mother of Michael III. This could be an argument for dating the source during Theodora's regency.

appoint another emperor. Hurry!” Then Theophilos harangued the troops gathered at Amorion and ordered the city gates to be closed. He left Amorion on a knife edge, lamenting for his children. When he arrived at Constantinople he put to death the nobles who wanted to appoint another emperor.⁶

We easily recognize in this account the “serious reason” (alluded to in the first version of *Genesios*) that forced the emperor to hasten back to the capital. This enables us again to connect the rebellion of Theophobos with the aftermath of Anzes.

Finally, the fact that the rebellion took place in Paphlagonia again links the rebellion with the defeat at Anzes. We are informed through the *Continuator* and *Genesios* that after being defeated at Anzes the imperial troops withdrew to the Chilikomon plain between the Halys and Iris rivers, to the south of Paphlagonia. They were met there by the emperor, who rebuked them for their failure and tried to persuade them to resume the fight against the Muslims.⁷ Since it is not a long way from the Chilikomon plain to Sinope, the Khurramite Persians could have taken refuge there when the political and military situation further deteriorated. As we shall see below in section 12.2, they could even have been made responsible for the defeat at Anzes.

Therefore it does not fit at all with this picture that, in a second version of the events, the *Continuator* connects the rebellion of the Persians not with Anzes, but with the expedition against Sozopetra conducted by Theophilos in 837.⁸ It seems that the *Continuator*, who already had access to several versions of the battle of Anzes, tried to make some sense of the parallel accounts he had at hand, and combined them into a single chronological narrative. We have insisted more than once on the unreliability of this chronological arrangement, which appears to have been a simple collation of very heterogeneous sources made by the *Continuator*. The best proof of this in the present case is provided by *Genesios* himself, whose parallel account of the expedition against Sozopetra, based on the same source as that used by the *Continuator*, is detached from the account of Theophobos’ revolt.⁹

We can safely conclude that the rebellion of the Khurramites took place after the summer of 838, certainly after the invading Abbasid army left Anatolia. Treadgold conjectured that the uprising of the Persians actually happened in or lasted until 839,¹⁰ and this is by no means impossible, for the events that led to the rebellion

⁶ Mich. Syr. 535–6, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 95.

⁷ Th. Cont. III.32 (128.21–129.7) and Gen. III.14 (48.60–49.66). See also Chapter 18.2.

⁸ Th. Cont. III.29 (124.6–125.15).

⁹ Gen. III.11 (44.42–45.51). A second mention of the campaign of Sozopetra in Gen. III.13 (46.1–47.5) has no correspondence in the *Continuator*.

¹⁰ Treadgold (1988) note 434, based on the fact that the Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 29–30 (225.194–204) mentions the birth of Michael III (born in 840) after the rebellion of the Persians in Sinope. However, this provides only a *terminus ante quem*, as no other dated event is recorded that can be located between the campaign of 838 and the birth of Michael.

were connected with a conspiracy against the emperor that had previously been suppressed by Theophilos, as we shall now see. However, the sources do not allow any firm conclusion on this point.

12.2 Whose Usurpation Came First?

Although scholars have noted that after Anzes the emperor hurried to the capital to suppress an attempted usurpation, they have not connected it with the Persians' revolt after Anzes and have treated both events as independent consequences of the defeat of the emperor.¹¹ However, we have already suggested in Chapter 8.2 that the name of Alexios Mousele could have been advanced by traditionalists in the capital as a convenient substitute for Theophilos when news of the defeat at Anzes (and of the emperor's death) reached Constantinople in the summer of 838. But whether or not Alexios Mousele was involved in this conspiracy, the possibility that the events taking place at Constantinople determined the Persians' revolt at Sinope is worth considering.

We have already seen in Chapter 5.6 that Theophobos took no active role as a military leader in the battle of Anzes. We know now (see Chapter 10.7) that this role belonged rather to his father Naṣr, *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* and commander of the Persian troops. Accordingly, if the Persians, being surrounded by the Muslims at Anzes, were effectively inclined to betray the emperor and come back to the caliph, as is stated in one version of the events referred to by the Continuator and Genesios,¹² the blame for conspiracy should have fallen on Naṣr rather than on Theophobos. But if the latter was indeed his son, this distinction is irrelevant. There are in any case reasons for suspecting the authenticity of this report, for Mas'ūdī presents Naṣr as the rescuer of Theophilos at Anzes.¹³ The hagiographer who wanted to present Manuel in a favourable light against his detractors (see Chapter 8.2) found it advisable to accuse the Persians of treachery, an option highly palatable to the ears of the "Roman" traditionalists. It is significant that in the aforementioned version of our two Byzantine historians, Manuel, after hearing during a watch that the Persians were secretly parleying in Arabic with the Muslims surrounding them, "informed the emperor of this secretly, and thought fit that he should save himself with the elite officers (*μετὰ λογάδων*) and not wait till morning".¹⁴ Manuel effectively crosses the enemy lines with Theophilos and

Moreover, the campaign of Amorion is recorded *ibid.* 32–3 (226.225–227.248) after the birth of Michael along with a number of anecdotes whose dating was surely unknown to the Logothete, despite the attempt of Treadgold (1988) 305–12 to fit them all into a chronological sequence.

¹¹ See for example Treadgold (1988) 300–301.

¹² Th. Cont. III.32 (128.14–16) and Gen. III.14 (48.50–54).

¹³ Mas'ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold* 136, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 332.

¹⁴ Th. Cont. III.32 (128.16–18).

some officers and saves them all. Manuel appears thus to be taking sides with the Romans and leaving the “treacherous” Persians behind, a very convenient version for the Constantinopolitan monastery where he was buried.

But if the Persians were left alone in front of the Arabs and they were in fact inclined to change sides, why did they then move to Sinope after all? It is quite doubtful that the Persians conceived any hopes of making an arrangement with the Arabs, who had captured Bābak the year before and had put him to a gruesome death in Sāmarrā. Naṣr, leader of the Khurramites at Anzes and Bābak’s lieutenant, could not have expected better treatment from the Muslims, especially if we consider that he is presented as a Christian convert by Mas‘ūdī.

It could therefore be that the Persians remained near the Chiliokomon plain after Anzes and that they only revolted when news about an usurpation came from Constantinople. We can only speculate about the reasons that moved them to revolt. They might have felt insecure about their own privileged position under Theophilos. The emperor could perhaps have been obliged to sacrifice the Persian contingents in order to assuage the “Roman” traditionalists, who surely made them responsible for the defeat, as we have seen in some of the versions of the battle of Anzes. The dismantling of the Persian tourma and the distribution of its contingents among the different themata, put in practice after Anzes, were perhaps the cause of the Persian revolt and not the consequence of it. Facing a dangerous conspiracy in the capital, details of which we are not informed about, the emperor could have tried to assuage opposition and gain allies by suppressing the “barbarian” contingent of the Khurramites. Inevitably, this decision led the Persians to open revolt against the emperor.

In the version of events preserved by the Logothete it is only after the Persians rebel against the emperor that Theophilos expresses his fears that they might eventually join the Arabs.¹⁵ Again this possibility appears unlikely considering the long confrontation of the Khurramites with the Abbasids. That Naṣr continued fighting the Arabs after the rebellion was suppressed is the best proof that the Persians never intended to defect to the Abbasids.

The role played by Theophobos in this revolt of the Persians may shed some light on events. Again, our historians have presented two different versions. In the first one, if we follow Genesios, Theophilos came back to the capital after Anzes, “entrusting Theophobos with putting the Persian contingents in order with the authority of a general (τῷ δὲ Θεοφώβῳ τὰ τῶν Περσῶν ἐγκεχειρικότος διαθέσθαι στρατηγικῶς τὰ στρατεύματα) and ordering him to return to the City after that” (εἶτα πρὸς τὴν βασιλίδαν τοῦτον ἐπανίεναι κελεύσαντος).¹⁶ The wording of the Continuator is very similar, although he makes Theophilos return to the capital after the campaign of 837, as we saw above. In any case, according to the Continuator, Theophilos returned to the capital “urging Theophobos to put

¹⁵ Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 28 (225.198): ἐδεδείει γάρ, μήπως προσρῶσι τοῖς Ἄραβι.

¹⁶ Gen. III.5 (40.20–29).

Persian affairs in good order with the authority of a general and to return to him again in good time” (τῷ Θεοφώβῳ τὰ τῶν Περσῶν εὖ διαθέσθαι καὶ στρατηγικῶς προτρεψάμενος καὶ αὖθις διὰ ταχέων ἐπαναδραμεῖν πρὸς αὐτόν).¹⁷

Scholars have usually understood that Theophilus left Theophobos behind in Asia Minor while he returned to the capital, but this is not expressly stated by either text.¹⁸ As both historians seem to follow the wording of their source closely, this lack of concretion appears not to be casual but a result of their wish not to suppose anything beyond the claims of the original text. Accordingly, if we read the passages literally, it is not to be excluded that Theophilus charged Theophobos with his mission after both had arrived in the capital.

This supposition is apparently confirmed by the second version of events presented by our two historians. According to Genesisios, after the defeat at Anzes, Theophobos was calumniated for pretending to the throne. The Persian became worried and “taking with him a select group of his followers he fled (ἀποδιδράσκει) to the city of Amastris”.¹⁹ From where he took flight is not stated in the text, although it could appear that Theophobos was by the emperor’s side at Constantinople when his position weakened as a result of continuous accusations launched against him before the emperor. If Theophobos had remained with the Persian troops in Asia Minor, he would not have taken flight at all, as is stated in the passage, but just moved to Amastris.

The Continuator also mentions that the continuous calumnies against Theophobos made people approach him with fear and hate (μισητὸν εἰργάζοντο τὸν ἄνδρα καὶ φοβερὸν). As he was not able to oppose his critics, he then took flight to Amastris “with children, women and some chosen men” (μετὰ τέκνων ὁμοῦ ... τε καὶ γυναικῶν καὶ τινῶν ἐκκρίτων ἀνδρῶν). Again, it appears that he fled from Constantinople, where we suppose that his family used to live, and not from somewhere in Asia Minor.²⁰

If we consider then that, after Anzes, Theophobos accompanied the emperor back to Constantinople and was then sent back to Asia Minor to the Persian contingent, things begin to make better sense. It appears likely that although Theophilus suppressed the conspiracy in the capital, he considered it convenient to send Theophobos away back to Asia Minor. Perhaps Theophobos was unwelcome

¹⁷ Th. Cont. III.29 (124.14–16).

¹⁸ The aorist participles ἐγκειρικὸτος and κελεύσαντος in Genesisios and προτρεψάμενος in the Continuator may indicate anteriority according to the uses of Classical Greek grammar, but they are put *after* the main action expressed by the return of Theophilus to Constantinople.

¹⁹ Gen. III.8 (43.87–89).

²⁰ The account provided by the Log. (A) *Theophilus* [130] 29 (225.194–203) is closely related to this second version of Genesisios and the Continuator, but its wording is less conclusive, as it is only said that “immediately” (εὐθύς) after Anzes, when Theophobos knew that he was being accused of pretending to the throne, “taking the Persians he descended to Sinope” (τοὺς Πέρσας ἀναλαβὼν κατήλθεν ἕως Σινώπης).

in some influential circles in the capital that Theophilus now tried to assuage after the failed conspiracy. But it is also possible that it was not he, but the Persians, who became increasingly unpalatable to “Roman” aristocrats. In any case, Theophilus apparently gave Theophobos some specific orders about the Persians we are not able to grasp from the ambiguous wording of Genesios and the Continuator. The common source said that Theophobos was charged “to put in order the Persian affairs with the authority of a general”, for the words τὰ τῶν Περσῶν διαθέσθαι στρατηγικῶς appear in our two historians’ accounts.²¹ It is not implausible to suppose that Theophobos was appointed general with the order of putting an end to the Persian tourma, because Naṣr, as tourmarches of the phoideratoi, was not expected to do so. Theophobos, who noticed the new balance of power, retired with his relatives to Amastris, where the Persians rebelled as soon as they were informed by him of the new plans concerning their future.

In the first version of the rebellion of Theophobos given by Genesios and the Continuator, it is said that the Persians proclaimed him emperor.²² The Logothete only says that he held Sinope tyrannically (τυραννικῶς) under his sway. Being already kaisar and *exousiastēs* of the Persians, having been raised in the imperial palace and married into the imperial family, Theophobos was certainly not unfit for the imperial throne. But it is doubtful that the Persians actually proclaimed him emperor, for he could not rely on any significant support. Again, we suspect that the Byzantine sources wanted to accuse the Persians of conspiracy, thus diverting attention from the responsibility of the previous usurpation against Theophilus in Constantinople. In fact, the second version of the rebellion does not mention any proclamation of Theophobos as emperor. Therefore Theophobos could have only been proclaimed king (not emperor) by the Persians, a title that enhanced the value of his rule over them as *exousiastēs*.

Be that as it may, according to this second version, Theophilus dispatched the droungarios of the watch Ooryphas with the fleet and easily captured Theophobos, who was carried back to Constantinople and put in jail.²³ This could have happened later in 838 or earlier in 839. The first version, where it is said that Theophobos remained in favour with the emperor even after the Persians’ revolt, provides us instead with the details of the dismantling of the Persian contingent, numbering 30,000 men, among the tourmarchai of the themata.²⁴ I think this version of the events, where Theophobos continued to enjoy the support of the emperor after 838, is more likely, for otherwise we would not find Theophobos’ father fighting the Arabs on behalf of the Byzantines at the Cilician frontier in 839 (see Chapters

²¹ It appears that Genesios understood that τὰ τῶν Περσῶν referred to τάγματα. But the meaning does not change very much even if we accept that τάγματα was in the common source.

²² Th. Cont. III.29 (124.17–18) and Gen. III.5 (40.28–29).

²³ Th. Cont. III.38 (136.3–12). Genesios does not mention the imprisonment of Theophobos.

²⁴ Th. Cont. III.29 (125.5–15) and Gen. III.6 (41.51–58).

10.2 and 19.3). Perhaps his incarceration reflects only the diminishing influence the former *kaisar* and ἐξουσιαστής had at court. Theophilos could have retained Theophobos hidden in the palace, avoiding any further contact with him and the Persians, but continuing to use him as a symbol in front of his people. It was only when the emperor was approaching death that he took the decision to execute Theophobos, as we are expressly told by the Continuator and Genesios in their second version of the events.²⁵

On balance, we may conclude that the influence of the Persian *tagma* had probably already ended in 839. With Theophobos disgraced and Naṣr killed at the Cilician frontier, the Persians ceased to play any further role in the eastern policy of Byzantium. The complete reorganization of the *themata* that Treadgold dates to the year 839 and connects with the end of the Persian contingent is, unfortunately, to a great extent conjectural.²⁶ Nevertheless it appears likely that the emperor took advantage of the disappearance of the Persian unit to introduce changes and create new *themata*. He could have been obliged to do so by the same sectors that opposed his “philobarbarian” policy.

²⁵ Th. Cont. III.38 (136.12–23) and Gen. III.8 (43.94–3).

²⁶ Treadgold (1988) 312–19.

SECTION IV

Warfare Against the Arabs

During most of his reign Theophilos faced successive Arab invasions into Byzantine territory and this with a frequency unprecedented since the campaigns of caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. In fact, after the death of Rashīd in 809, the caliphate had plunged into an internal crisis, first as a result of the internecine war between Rashīd's sons Amīn and Ma'mūn (809–813), and then because of the period of instability that followed, marked by the absence of the victorious Ma'mūn from Baghdad. The crisis ended only in 819 when Ma'mūn entered as caliph into his capital and put an end to the usurpation of Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī. Ten more years passed before Ma'mūn invaded Byzantine territory for the first time (Chapter 14.1). It was 830 and Theophilos had come to power only months earlier. In the next three years, Byzantine and Muslim forces regularly confronted each other in Anatolia (Chapter 14.2–7). After the sudden death of Ma'mūn in 833, internal problems initially prevented Ma'mūn's brother and successor Mu'taṣim from taking the field again and marching against Byzantium, so that between 834 and 837 it was Theophilos who led victorious campaigns on the eastern frontier of the empire (Chapters 15–17). A massive expedition against Ankyra and Amorion led by Mu'taṣim in 838 put a provisory end to Byzantine victories and dealt a severe blow to the empire (Chapter 17), which however did not remain inactive during the last years of Theophilos' reign, even taking the initiative by sending embassies to western powers or undertaking some minor actions on the eastern frontier (Chapter 18).

This section will deal extensively with all these military campaigns, focusing especially on aspects that have not been adequately considered until now. The assessment, despite the capture of Amorion in 838, is not so negative for Theophilos as is usually assumed. But before considering the wars waged by Byzantines and Muslims in eastern Anatolia during Theophilos' reign, it may be convenient to trace the precedents for them and consider the involvement of the caliph Ma'mūn in the so-called Byzantine civil war as well as the period immediately following it (Chapter 13). This is necessary because, as we shall try to prove, the Arabs took part in this conflict to a greater extent than hitherto presumed. It is not a coincidence that Ma'mūn's arrival in Baghdad in 819 occurred simultaneously with the outbreak of civil war. And it is perhaps no coincidence either that the failure of the usurpation of Thomas the Slav, backed by Arab forces in 824, put a provisory end to military actions of the Muslims against Byzantium.

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Chapter 13

Invasion or Civil War? Thomas the Slav and the Arabs

13.1 Thomas' Stay in the Caliphate and the Two Thomases

We have seen in Chapter 2.2 that the rebellion of Thomas the Slav had already started in the reign of Leo V, c. 819–820, as stated in the Latin version of the letter Michael II of Amorion wrote to the western emperor Louis after the end of the war. Contrary to former studies, we concluded that in this respect the information provided by the letter is to be trusted as it is corroborated by other contemporary sources. Now, there is another controversial point in the *Letter to Louis* that needs to be considered here as it is of crucial importance in understanding the outbreak of the war: the statement that Thomas was a Christian renegade who lived among the Arabs after he fled from Byzantium during the reign of the empress Eirene (797–802) until the very beginning of his usurpation.

The *Letter to Louis* says that Thomas was the servant of a high patrician (“cuidam ex maximis patriciis subiectus”) under Eirene’s reign (“tempore quo Herena imperium tenuit”). When his adultery with his master’s wife was discovered, he was forced to flee to the Persians in order to avoid punishment (“profugit in Persas, timens legalem subire sententiam”). He stayed among them from Eirene’s time until the reign of Leo the Armenian (“cum illic moras fecisset a diebus praefatae Herenae usque ad dictum Leone”), apostatizing from the Christian faith (“fidem Christi abnegans”). He could then convince the Saracens and other peoples that he was indeed the emperor Constantine himself, the son of Eirene (“quod ipse esset Constantinus, filius saepe dictae Herenae imperatricis”), and that another had been blinded at his post, so that he had been able to escape unharmed, his eyes being unhurt (“quod alter pro eo esset oculis privatus et ipse inlesis oculis sanus evasisset”).¹

The same version of events appears in what we in Chapter 2.2 called Version A of the Continuator and Genesisios on the origins of Thomas, the version to which both authors gave more credence. The report of the Continuator says the following:

According to the first and only report, which I trust, in as much as we have assurance from certain written sources, this Thomas (τοῦτον ... τὸν Θωμᾶν) was born of humble and poor parents who, moreover, were descended from the Slavs who are often intermingled in the East. Faced, then, with a life of poverty, he

¹ *Letter to Louis* 476.9–17.

ventured his luck and, running off from his country, introduced himself into this great city. And attaching himself as servant and assistant to a certain person of consular rank, he hastened through his intemperance to dishonour and insult his master's bed and marriage. Being caught in the act and unable to bear the great shame and scourging on this account, he fled to the descendants of Hagar and, giving them sufficient assurance though his successive deeds over many years – for it was about the twenty-fifth year he passed – and the fact that he renounced Christ our God, he became leader of a certain military division and took up arms against the Christians, promising with the greatest force to bring the empire of the Romans under their control. And lest anyone should stand in his way when he came to the land of the Romans, but might all join and bear the brunt of battle for him, he claimed and declared himself to be Constantine, the son of Eirene, whom madness and cruelty of custom had earlier deprived of his eyes as well as the imperial power, whereafter he also departed from this life.²

Genesios' account is very similar. I follow Kaldellis' translation:

The following account of Thomas' career is said to be more correct. This rebel came from a humble country and a lowly station, and travelled to the Imperial City of Constantine for the sake of securing the necessities of life. There he attached himself to one of the patricians (this was the Bardanes we mentioned earlier). He was seized by this man for the crime of adultery, which Nikephoros, the emperor reigning at the time, had enjoined him to commit, as he was envious of Bardanes's nobility and soul. Fleeing his trial for adultery, which he had not actually committed but only attempted, he escaped to Syria. The first thing that he did was to renounce his Christian faith, and then he dwelt there for a long time. After twenty-five years had passed, he spread a false rumour about himself. He claimed to be Constantine, the son of Leo and Eirene. This Constantine, on account of his malicious character, lost his throne as well as his sight, and died shortly afterwards. His body was placed in a tomb on some consecrated ground in the Imperial City. But this murderous man, who lived among the Saracens, persuaded them with brilliant promises that he would subject the Empire of the Romans to them, if they gave him enough money and a good army for this purpose.³

As we see, both the Continuator and Genesios record a version of events very close to that of the *Letter to Louis*, although they provide additional details, as for example the Slav origins of Thomas (the Continuator), the twenty-five years of Thomas' stay among the Arabs (the Continuator and Genesios) or the fact that Thomas served a Constantinopolitan patrician (Genesios). Since these details are

² Th. Cont. II.10 (50.18–51.12).

³ Gen. II.4 (25.50–26.69).

not given in the *Letter to Louis*, it must be concluded that both historians followed a version close to the official one, but not the text of the *Letter* itself.

Genesios gives a further important detail not mentioned by the Continuator, that the patrician was in fact Bardanes the Turk. The identification of the patrician as Bardanes, who revolted against the emperor Nikephoros in 803, probably forced Genesios to date the exile of Thomas to Nikephoros' reign, instead of to Eirene's, as stated by the Continuator. This identification was possible because both authors' sources omitted the reign of Eirene, unlike the *Letter to Louis*, which referred to her reign three times. But dating the exile to the reign of Nikephoros goes against the chronology, for if the revolt started in 819 and Nikephoros began his reign in 802, Thomas could have passed no more than 17 years among the Arabs, and certainly not 25. It may simply be that 25 is a round figure, but this number fits more with the sole reign of Eirene, which had begun in 797, although she had been regent and co-emperor since 780. Therefore, as the reference to Bardanes is lacking in the version of the Continuator (and in the *Letter to Louis*), I consider that this was a personal inference by Genesios.

In fact, Genesios probably tried to reconcile this version of events with the service of Thomas the Armenian under Bardanes the Turk. In the book devoted to Leo the Armenian Genesios mentioned that a monk living in Philomelion predicted to Bardanes the Turk that of the three men under his service, two of them, Leo and Michael, would be emperors, whereas the third, Thomas, would be proclaimed as such but fail at the end to gain effective power.⁴ Genesios reasoned that if the Thomas serving Bardanes was Thomas the Slav, the patrician served by Thomas the Slav must have been Bardanes. These inferences do not take into account the fact that Bardanes was a strategos in Anatolia and not a simple patrician in Constantinople. The Continuator for his part did not come to this conclusion and avoided identifying Bardanes as the anonymous patrician named in his source.⁵

For the Continuator the Thomas serving Bardanes was rather the other Thomas whose origins he recorded in what we called Version B. This is his account:

According to the other report, which differs in no wise concerning his name, this was the Thomas (τοῦτον εἶναι τὸν Θεομάχον) who had been formerly with Bardanos and was awarded a dignity by Leo when he became ruler. Thomas was then holding office as leader of the foederatoi, residing in the Anatolic thema; and no sooner had the news reached his ears that Michael had slain Leo, than he set about avenging him and satisfying his own anger – for he had long, since youth, been somehow at variance with Michael – and also fearing the prophecies

⁴ Gen. I.6 (6.2–7.36).

⁵ See also Signes Codoñer (1995) 230–33 for a discussion of the problem, although I came there to the conclusion that it was the Continuator who suppressed the reference to Bardanes from this version of the events.

concerning him,⁶ he set up an opposing force, and this no small or weak force, but a mighty and manly and valiant one, having with him men of all ages who could wield the spear. For it happened that Michael was hated by all in any case because he participated, as has been said, in the evil heresy of the Athinganoi and because, with his defective speech, he was renowned for cowardice and weakness; moreover, because his soul was no less defective than his speech, he was detested and considered a burden by many. But Thomas, though lame of leg and barbarian of race, was nevertheless venerable with his white hair and all the more beloved for the affability and wit, esteemed amongst the military, which was somehow innate in him from childhood, and he seemed second to none of those of noble body. He won over to his side those who collected public taxes and, striving to subject the many to his will through generous gifts, from a person of little importance he became renowned, and from one with the least means, one great. He prevailed with persuasion and a certain amiability upon those who had desire for a new state of affairs and their own enrichment, but with force and against the will of those who had already had bad experience of civil revolts.⁷

The parallel report by Genesisios, more succinct, avoids mentioning Bardanes. In Kaldellis' translation:

It is said that when Thomas (ὁ Θωμᾶς) heard of Michael's elevation to the throne he quickly contrived to revolt against him with a large army. For the two men had always been opposed to each other, and Michael was hated by the entire army of the Anatolians, and was equally unpopular on account of his native town, in which as it seems, a great number of Athinganoi dwelt, because of the defect of his speech, and because he was not considered by some to be a brave enough man. Thomas, on the other hand, was loved by all for his courage, and no less for his cheerful disposition and affability. He rivalled Leo in all noble qualities, even though he had Scythian ancestry, and was in addition an old man, and had a lame leg. He now seized all the tax-collectors, laid claim in writing to the regular exactions, and by distributing them to the people he assembled a large force to use against Michael.⁸

In this Version B Genesisios does not expressly identify Thomas with the Thomas serving under Bardanes' command, as the Continuator does. Significantly, he refers to the "Scythian ancestry" of Thomas, which undoubtedly recalls the Slav

⁶ The text of the Continuator says only "the predictions concerning him" (τὰς περὶ αὐτοῦ προρρήσεις), but the editors (Combefis and Bekker) changed the text into τὴν περὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἐν τῷ Φιλομηλίῳ μοναχοῦ προρρησιν following Skyltizes, *Michael ho Traulos* 5 (80.59–60).

⁷ Th. Cont. II.11 (52.8–53.13).

⁸ Gen. II.2 (23.80–93), trans. Kaldellis (1998) 28.

origins mentioned by the Continuator in Version A⁹ and is not compatible with the Armenian origins Genesisios attributed to the Thomas serving under Bardanes.¹⁰ However, Genesisios introduced his first account about Thomas in the book devoted to Michael II without any special presentation of the man, as if he were already known to the reader, although the only previous mentions of him, as follower of Bardanes and later *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* under Leo, appear in the previous book devoted to Leo the Armenian.

The Continuator, who did not mention the Armenian origins of the Thomas serving under Bardanes, had no problem in identifying him with the Thomas of his Version B, just calling Thomas “barbarian of race” (τῷ γένει βάρβαρος). Instead, he mentioned the Slav origins of Thomas in his Version A, as we have seen. But for Version B, the Continuator expressly recapitulated all the information he had previously provided about Thomas in order to inform his readers about who this Thomas really was: the commander under Bardanes¹¹ and later *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* under Leo,¹² a man fearful of the prophecies about him, meaning undoubtedly those of the monk of Philomelion who predicted his usurpation when he was still serving under Bardanes.¹³

It appears thus that our two historians had at their disposal two completely different versions of the person of Thomas. They doubted whether the two versions referred to the same person and were not even sure about which of the two accounts of the rebel Thomas was to be reconciled with the Thomas serving under Bardanes and later appointed *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi*. This explains why the Continuator and Genesisios made different additions to the two alternative versions. Doubts about the identity of the person are more clearly expressed by the Continuator at the beginning of Version B, where he states that “according to the other report, which differs in no wise concerning his name, this was the Thomas (τοῦτον εἶναι τὸν Θεομάν) who had been formerly with Bardanes and was awarded a dignity by Leo when he became ruler”. This statement presupposes that the Thomas of the previous Version A reported by the Continuator was, according to him, *not* the same Thomas who served under Bardanes. This Version A was the one the Continuator preferred. His choice was a meditated one, for he even wrote some lines introducing the two contradictory reports about Thomas. These are worth quoting here:

At this time a civil war broke out in the East and filled the world with all manner of evils, reducing from many to few the number of men: fathers took up arms against their sons, brothers against those born of the same womb, and finally

⁹ See Köpstein (1983) 65–6 for the usual meaning of “Scythe” at the time.

¹⁰ Gen. I.6 (7.14–15): ἐξ Ἀρμενίων τὸ γένος κατὰγοντα. See Chapter 2.1 for further discussion on this point.

¹¹ Th. Cont. I.1 (7.2–5)

¹² Th. Cont. I.12 (24.1–2).

¹³ Th. Cont. I.2 (7.19–8.12).

friends against those who loved them the most. Their leader was Thomas, about whom diverse reports circulated. Now, on account of the lapse of so much time, we, being men, have received the details of this history through hearing, not seeing; and in order that we may in all cases preserve the truth, it is necessary that we should record events handed down not only in one manner but in a different one as well, in as much as our presentation is in no wise compromised by such ambivalence and variation, but rather, thus inspires more confidence in those who forever contend that something is not so but otherwise. For it would be best if Truth was naked and we men had knowledge of all things without any curtain. But since the long time that has gone past renders our knowledge more feeble, as if covered by a veil, we must rely on common report and rumour in order somehow to present the facts, rather than abandoning them altogether to Lethe's stream.¹⁴

When I studied the problem some time ago, I came to the conclusion that there was no reason for accepting that two Thomases might have been confounded in the sources of our authors.¹⁵ Now, I think that this was exactly what happened. In fact, the two versions about the origins of Thomas the Slav are irreconcilable. If Thomas remained exiled among the Arabs for 25 years, he could not have made any career under Leo and been promoted to the post of *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi*, as we saw in Chapter 2.1. Moreover, if Thomas the Slav, the rebel, pretended to be Constantine VI, blinded by his mother Eirene in 802, he could not have been the *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* or had any other official post in the empire at the time of his rebellion, for in that case the fraud would have been obvious and absurd.¹⁶ To supplant Constantine VI, Thomas needed to have been “out of circulation” for some time. Again, how could Thomas have convinced the Arabs (not to speak of the Byzantines!) of his false identity if he had just come from the empire as a rebel official?

Modern historians came to the conclusion that as both histories could not be true at the same time, one of them should be discarded as false, and that it should be Version A, which made Thomas an exile among the Arabs for 25 years. They considered that the concrete details in Version B about Bardanes and the appointment of Thomas as commander of the *phoideratoi* spoke for its authenticity and therefore they rejected altogether Version A as pure fantasy or even as a product of Michael's propaganda.¹⁷ However, we have already established in Chapter 2.2 that the *Letter to Louis* is actually right when it states

¹⁴ Th. Cont. I.9 (49.20–50.17).

¹⁵ Signes Codoñer (1995) 241–3.

¹⁶ Lemerle (1965) 284 rejects as “légendaire” the supplantation of Constantine VI by Thomas. For her part, Köpstein (1983) 73–4 and note 81 thinks that Thomas could have adopted the name Constantine when he was proclaimed emperor, although she also rules out the possibility that he supplanted Constantine VI.

¹⁷ Lemerle (1965) 258–9, 283–4 and Köpstein (1983) 69–72.

that Thomas rebelled against Leo and not against Michael. Why should we discard other details provided by this text, however close it was to the official version? We argued that Michael could not have altered facts so blatantly in front of Louis the Pious. In fact, Thomas controlled the Balkans for almost a year and could have sent emissaries to Italy while Michael remained besieged in Constantinople. The detailed account of Thomas' revolt preserved in the *Letter to Louis* is rather exceptional and was perhaps intended to counterbalance previous reports of the war coming to Louis. Moreover, there is nothing in the events the *Letter* refers to that cannot be historically true.

There are, for example, many precedents for the supplanting of a dead emperor's personality. Turning our eyes to Rome, we know that there were at least three persons who supplanted Nero after his suicide in 68. Tacitus informs us of the first, who appeared in 69, during the reign of Vitellius. This is the beginning of Tacitus' account:

About this time Achaia and Asia Minor were terrified by a false report that Nero was at hand. Various rumours were current about his death; and so there were many who pretended and believed that he was still alive. The adventures and enterprises of the other pretenders I shall relate in the regular course of my work. The pretender in this case was a slave from Pontus, or, according to some accounts, a freedman from Italy, a skilful harp-player and singer, accomplishments, which, added to a resemblance in the face, gave a very deceptive plausibility to his pretensions. After attaching to himself some deserters, needy vagrants whom he bribed with great offers, he put to sea.

He then arrived at the island of Kythnos, close to the Attica and armed a body of slaves but his adventure ended in accidental death.¹⁸

Some time later, during the reign of Titus (79–81), another impostor made his appearance. According to Cassius Dio:

In his reign also the False Nero appeared, who was an Asiatic named Terentius Maximus. He resembled Nero both in appearance and in voice (for he too sang to the accompaniment of the lyre). He gained a few followers in Asia, and in his advance to the Euphrates attached a far greater number, and finally sought refuge with Artabanos, the Parthian leader, who, because of his anger against Titus, both received him and set about making preparations to restore him to Rome.¹⁹

Twenty years after Nero's death, under Domitian (81–96), according to the testimony of Suetonius, who declared himself witness of the events, a third pretender appeared who became popular among the Parthians and received their

¹⁸ Tacitus, *Histories* II.8.

¹⁹ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXVI.19.

support, so that only with difficulty could they be persuaded to give him up.²⁰ Tacitus confirms this account and adds that the supplanting of Nero almost turned into a war between the two major powers: “the armies of Parthia were all but set in motion by the cheat of a counterfeit Nero” (“mota prope etiam Parthorum arma falsi Neronis ludibrio”).²¹

Such was apparently the longing for the dead Nero that a veritable “Nero redivivus legend” developed, whose earliest written version is found in the *Sybilline Oracles*, where it is claimed that Nero did not actually die, but found refuge in Parthia, from where he would return to Rome leading a large army to destroy it.²² Augustine of Hippo said that the legend was still popular at the beginning of the fifth century.²³

There are further interesting parallels of the supplanting of dead emperors much closer in time to Thomas’ uprising. For instance, during the reign of Phokas the Sassanid king Chosroes alleged that he had with him a deceased son of the emperor Maurice, called Theodosios, and even made “provision that he should take possession of the empire of the Romans”.²⁴ The practice continued well into the eighth century: Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234* refer that a Christian renegade, called Beshar, pretended to be Tiberios, the deceased son of the emperor Constantine (meaning Constantine IV Pogonatos) or alternatively Justinian (meaning Justinian II, who had in fact a son named Tiberios). He apparently convinced the caliph of his false identity and got his support. Dressed as an emperor and backed by the caliph, he visited some parts of Mesopotamia and Syria (Edessa) and even sent embassies to the Romans.²⁵ Although Michael does not tell us the end of the story, the *Chronicle of 1234* adds that when his imposture was detected, Beshar was impaled by the Muslims in Edessa. Were it not for this end, the protagonist could be identified with the Byzantine renegade Bashīr/Bēsēr who later crossed the frontier back to Byzantium and is given a prominent role in iconophile sources in convincing Leo III to adopt iconoclasm.²⁶ In any case, the figure of the supplanter is one of an adventurer and not very dissimilar from the renegade Bashīr/Bēsēr who had a sort of mercenary living on each side of the cultural border and reminds us of the “akrites” Manuel (see Chapter 5.4).

As we see, there are common patterns in all these events: slaves and ordinary men supplant dead emperors or their sons, they find support in the eastern provinces, and either Parthian and Sassanid kings or the caliph grant military aid to pretenders, if not invade Roman territory themselves. Obviously, legends and

²⁰ Suetonius, *Life of Nero* 57.

²¹ Tacitus, *Histories* 1.2.

²² *Sybilline Oracles*, ed. Geffcken (1902), IV.119–24, V.137–41, 361–96.

²³ Augustine, *City of God* XX.19.3.

²⁴ Theoph. 291 and 294.

²⁵ Mich. Syr. 462, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 2, 503–4, and *Chronicle of 1234*, vol. 1, 311–12, trans. Chabot (1937) 242–3.

²⁶ See Griffith (1990).

rumours distort the truth, for these are the *conditio sine qua non* for the supplanting of a dead emperor, as the pretender always takes advantage of the simplicity and superstitions of his contemporaries. But we need not question the authenticity of the historical events (no modern historian has done so for the three – if not more – false Neros), nor doubt that supplanting a dead emperor, when the occasion arose, could have been an expedient way for eastern rulers to meddle in the affairs of the Roman Empire. Certainly, all these parallels do not mean that we must immediately trust Version A about Thomas, but it lends it more credibility. It also makes it more likely that such a supplanting of the person of a dead emperor might have taken place, especially if he was as popular as Constantine VI apparently was for the Byzantines.²⁷ However, and before some classicist argues that Michael was inspired by the legend of Nero redivivus when he wrote his *Letter to Louis*, the testimony of two further sources must be adduced here, for they support the long stay of the rebel Thomas among the Arabs.

The first source is the chronicle of George the Monk, who wrote during the reign of Michael III of Amorion (842–867) and was a fervent defender of images:

Under his reign (ἐφ' οὗ), the rebel Thomas, who had already set off from the eastern regions (ἐκ τῶν ἀνατολικῶν μερῶν ἀπάρας ἧδη) and gathered previously (προσυλλεξάμενος) a mixed army of vagabonds, hastily proceeded against Constantinople, having wickedly seized the imperial dignity and without honour (παρ' ἄξιαν), for parting from the Roman land as a low-born man (δυσγενῆς) of no merit (ἀφανῆς) he came to the Syrian lands, changing his name to Constantine, the son of the empress Eirene. After having duped most of the barbarians and Christians, and assembling a huge army from different nations, he marched against Constantinople with a multitude of men and a great fleet.²⁸

This version of events tallies exactly with the one given by the *Letter to Louis*. Here we have again the reference to the usurping of Constantine's VI person and the duping of the Arabs. We also have the confirmation that Thomas could not have been a *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi* when he departed for Syria, for he was *δυσγενῆς τε καὶ ἀφανῆς*, in sum, a man of no special merit who made his fortune among the Arabs. Moreover, he seems to have left Byzantium without much honour (παρ' ἄξιαν), an allusion that could be connected with the accusation of adultery with his master's wife, although the reference is too vague to allow any sure conclusion. Finally, contrary to what Lemerle thought, it is not said that the rebellion of Thomas began under Michael, but just that he marched against Constantinople during his reign, after previously assembling an army. Note also that Thomas is said to "part from the eastern regions" in his attack against the capital, meaning the eastern border of the empire but also simply the east. An

²⁷ For Constantine VI see Speck (1978).

²⁸ Georg. Mon 793.7–16. See Lemerle (1965) 259–61, who made a partial summary of the passage and omitted some important elements of it.

uprising of the Anatolian themata would probably not have been expressed in such a way. This coincidence between the chronicler and the *Letter to Louis* is highly significant, first because of the early date of the work (the author could have even witnessed the events), and second because he did not have any reason to support the official version of an iconoclast emperor like Michael II if this did not correspond to the truth.

Even more significant is the evidence provided by Michael the Syrian about Thomas. It consists of two passages, apparently taken from different sources. In the first one, Michael says the following:

At this time a problem arose among the Romans because of a man called Thomas, who, since the reign of Hārūn [al-Rashīd], had claimed that he was the son of Constantine and had demanded from Hārūn an army to take the Empire. Although Hārūn had avoided doing that, he treated him with honour as the son of the emperor. When Hārūn died, Ma'mūn called him and sent him with an army, either to seize the Empire of the Romans and render it to him, or to cause them trouble by making war. This Thomas was a magician and pretended to have visions.²⁹

A brief account of some lines of the development of the civil war that ended with the execution of Thomas, who is the said to be the “son of Mōsmār”, follows. Lemerle considered this account as a “caricature de l’histoire”³⁰ and it has since then scarcely been considered in any analysis of the revolt of Thomas. However, the account of Michael complements very well the version provided by the *Letter of Louis* and what we called Version A of the Byzantine historians. This is remarkable, for Michael the Syrian could not have based his report on the official version of events, not only because he relied upon local sources, but also because he provides many details absent from Greek accounts. Moreover, Michael is a reliable source, as will be seen again and again in the next chapters of this section when considering his testimony about the wars Theophilos fought against the Arabs. He certainly is a later author, but used very early sources, such as the Jacobite patriarch Dionysios of Tell-Mahrē (818–845), who was the main source for this part of the work.³¹

Accordingly, it appears highly relevant that Michael presents the usurper Thomas as being in the Abbasid court since the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd, for the reign of this caliph of 786–809 tallies perfectly with the reign of Eirene of 797–802, at which time the *Letter to Louis* said that Thomas fled to the Arabs. Moreover, Thomas seems to have remained in Muslim lands since his arrival, for it is there that Ma'mūn finds him when he enters the capital in August 819, after many years of internal strife and conflict for control of the caliphate. That this

²⁹ Mich. Syr. 501, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 37.

³⁰ Lemerle (1965) 282–3.

³¹ Weltecke (1997).

Thomas could have served the imperial army under Leo V in the meantime is not reconcilable with the version of events provided by Michael.

Also interesting is the remark that it was really Ma'mūn who "sent him with an army" against the Byzantine Empire. This is a very important point, for it not only confirms, as we already saw in Chapter 2.2, that the civil war began before Leo V's death c. 819–820, but also that it started not as a civil war, but as an outright invasion of the empire backed by the Abbasid caliphate. We will consider complementary evidence supporting this conclusion below in section 13.2. For the moment, it suffices to say that the information provided appears again to be historically sound.

Furthermore, Thomas is also said to pretend to be "the son of Constantine". This is slightly different to previous accounts, for Thomas does not identify himself with emperor Constantine VI, but only with a supposed son of his. However, whether we trust Michael the Syrian or the Byzantine sources, this does not change much about the fraud concocted by Thomas. On the contrary, it confirms that he attempted to supplant some member of the Isaurian dynasty to gain the support of the caliphs. This does not fit well with an official career as commander of the armies, let alone as tourmarches of the *phoideratoi*. It fits much better with the person of an "outsider", as we suggested above. That Michael the Syrian depicts him as a magician is in accordance with what was to be expected in this case. It also explains what the *Letter to Louis* intended to say when it labelled Thomas as "disciple of the old devil and ready to accomplish his deeds" (*antiqui diaboli discipulus et eius operum promptus perpetrator*): as a magician, Thomas was expected to be a servant of the devil. The fact that Michael II, "performing first the ceremony which seemed fitting to emperors of old and has become custom", carried out a *calcatio colli* ("trampling the neck") on the defeated Thomas the Slav and immediately "mutilated him, lopping off his feet and hands"³² would have perhaps been inappropriate if the rebel had been a Roman and not considered a "barbarian renegade". The *calcatio colli* applies in fact in *De Ceremoniis* to a defeated Arab ruler,³³ and was usually applied to barbarian captives in Roman times.³⁴ Had the rebel been the Armenian Thomas, serving for years in the imperial army, he would probably have met a less harsh punishment, or even been confined in a monastery like the deposed Michael I.

Unfortunately, the very valuable indication that Thomas was "son of Mōsmār" cannot be interpreted in the light of further evidence.

The second passage in which Michael the Syrian refers to Thomas has already been quoted in Chapter 1.3. There it is said that an anonymous Roman approached the caliph pretending to be of imperial stock. Ma'mūn welcomed the impostor and

³² Th. Cont. II.19 (69.12–14)

³³ *De cer.* II.19 (610.15–20)

³⁴ For the *calcatio colli* as a sign of domination over the enemy and a token of brutality, see Malone (2009).

ordered the patriarch Job to consecrate him as emperor.³⁵ Thomas is not named in this second version that is evidently misplaced in the chronicle of Michael,³⁶ for it is told in connection with the first campaign of Ma'mūn against Theophilos, therefore in 830. Nonetheless, this information is also important, for it proves that Michael the Syrian used two different sources for the rebellion of Thomas. And in both of them the caliph appears as the actual mastermind behind the rebellion.

On balance, it appears that we have no reason to doubt what the different sources tell us about the origins of Thomas the Slav: that he was a Byzantine exile who fled from Byzantium during the reign of Eirene at the end of the eighth century, probably escaping a punishment; that he was welcomed by the Abbasid caliphs because he pretended to be either the emperor Constantine himself or his son; that it was only upon the arrival of Ma'mūn in Baghdad in August 819 that he was finally given the military aid he needed to invade Byzantine territory and march against the capital. If the version of Michael in his *Letter to Louis* is to be mistrusted, it is just for his presentation of the man as a renegade, for he could not have pretended to be an emperor having apostatized from the Christian faith. This was surely part of Michael's propaganda against the rebel, but on the whole, the version of the *Letter to Louis* appears to render a more or less accurate account of the events.

As a consequence, Thomas the Slav appears as the Muslim equivalent of the Christian Theophobos: whereas the "renegade" Thomas was supported by the Arabs as a usurper against Constantinople because of his supposed identity with Constantine VI, in his eastern campaigns the emperor Theophilos used Theophobos as a pretender to the Persian "throne" because of his supposed princely blood. Could it be that Thomas' usurpation provided a pattern for the Byzantine promotion of Theophobos as ἐξουσιαστής τῶν Περσῶν we considered in Chapter 11.4?

But what about the Thomas who served under Bardanes, remained faithful to the general when he fell into disgrace and was later appointed tourmarches of the phoideratoi? If he cannot be identified with the rebel Thomas the Slav, he must have been another person, as the Continuator and Genesios already suspected. He must have been an Armenian, as Genesios remarked, which made of him a trustee of Leo the Armenian, who is depicted as his playmate. This explains his later appointment as tourmarches of the phoideratoi when Leo came to power. But what prompted the identification of Thomas the Armenian with Thomas the Slav?

The cause of the error is to be sought in the character of the common source that Genesios and the Continuator used for their Version B. Unlike Version A, which both rightly preferred and which in fact tallies with the reports provided by such disparate sources as the *Letter to Louis*, George the Monk and Michael the Syrian, this Version B identified Thomas the Slav with Thomas the Armenian. Or

³⁵ Mich. Syr. 524, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 75.

³⁶ For misplaced doublets in the chronicle of Michael the Syrian see further examples in Chapter 15.1.

perhaps we must formulate it inversely, for it appears that this source identified Thomas the Armenian with his namesake rebel. Indeed, in Version B Thomas the Armenian appeared as the protagonist, probably not alone, but along with his companions Leo the Armenian and Michael of Amorion. All three were presented as close friends serving under Bardanes, for whom one day a monk living in Philomelion prophesied a brilliant career. This prophecy was in fact fulfilled for Leo and Michael, who became emperors, but not for Thomas the Armenian, who did not. However, prophecies often come in threes, so that Thomas, the third man serving under Bardanes, was also said by the monk merely to attain acclamation as emperor, but not real power and to die wretchedly.³⁷

Thus the career of Thomas the Armenian was identified with that of Thomas the Slav, his contemporary. We do not know whether the confusion was deliberate, but in any case it fitted well with the author's intentions to write a prophetic text explaining the events during the period of the second iconoclasm. This text, which revolved around the prophecy of the monk of Philomelion, must have been very popular at the time the Continuator and Genesios wrote, perhaps because it offered a connected sequence of events and provided them with many historical details they were eagerly looking for. In fact, the account of both authors about the rebellion of Bardanes the Turk, inserted at the beginning of their works, is taken from this source. It may also be that the story about the monk of Philomelion was written in verses and typically used obscure words, thus favouring the confusion of identities. The Continuator refers indeed to works written in "metric composition" (δι' ἑμμέτρου ποιήσεως) when mentioning some prophecies made to Leo V on the issue of icon worship.³⁸

Accordingly, to give a more dramatic effect to the prophecy of the monk of Philomelion, Thomas the Armenian was turned into the rebel Thomas the Slav in a later source dating perhaps to the beginning of the tenth century. This may explain why in Version B, based on the story of the three companions serving under Bardanes, the rebel is presented as rising in arms against Michael only when he hears that Leo has been slain; that Thomas is further said to have been always at variance with Michael; and that he is finally represented as esteemed amongst the military. These features still belong to Thomas the Armenian, the companion of Leo and tourmarches of the phoideratoi, but immediately after he has already appeared as a rebel, assuming the role of Thomas the Slav.

We do not know how Thomas the Armenian reacted, faced by the invasion of Thomas the Slav. If Michael of Amorion was tourmarches of the phoideratoi at the end of Leo's reign, as we conjectured in Chapter 2.1, then Thomas might have already been dead or promoted to a post as strategos. He might have been dispatched by Michael of Amorion to face Thomas the Slav's troops when these first entered Byzantine territory, as stated by Michael in the *Letter to Louis* (Chapter 2.2). Nor should we rule out the possibility that Thomas the Armenian joined the

³⁷ Th. Cont. I.2 (7.5–8.11) and Gen. I.6 (6.2–7.36).

³⁸ Th. Cont. I.16 (28.15).

army of Thomas the Slav when the latter launched his massive attack against Constantinople in 821. All this remains pure conjecture. But what really matters is that Thomas the Armenian disappears from history because of his identification with Thomas the Slav. The Continuator and Genesios are not to blame for that, for they did their best in trying to disentangle the contradictions in their sources. The Continuator wrote, indeed, as we saw, an excursus to justify his impotence when trying to seek out the distant truth from behind contradictory reports.

Neither Genesios nor the Continuator could detect the forgery of the prophetic text from which they borrowed the information about Bardanes the Turk and his three trusted men. Our historians did not notice the final purpose of this text, perhaps because they consulted it only through excerpts.³⁹ In any case, there are plenty of cases of such confusions in our period, for example the confusion between Leo the Armenian and Leo Skleros revealed by David Turner some time ago.⁴⁰

13.2 Arab Troops in Thomas' Army

Once we have established that Thomas the Slav was directly supported by the caliph in his attempt to seize the capital of the empire, we are in a condition to understand better the pieces of information preserved in our sources that mention the presence of significant contingents of Arab troops among the soldiers of Thomas' army. That Arab troops cooperated with a Byzantine rebel against the reigning emperor is by no means unprecedented. Suffice it here to mention the case of the rebel Saborios/Shapohr in the year 666–667, who, according to Theophanes, made an agreement with the caliph Mu'āwiya through his envoy Sergios against Konstans II. Accordingly, Sergios “took along the Arab general Phadalis as an ally to fight with barbarian auxiliaries on the side of Saborios” (*παρέλαβε Φαδαλᾶν, στρατηγὸν Ἀράβων, μετὰ βοήθειας βαρβαρικῆς συμμαχεῖν τῷ Σαβωρίῳ*).⁴¹

Were Arab troops fighting with Thomas? At the very beginning of their list of nations supporting Thomas (see Chapter 2.3) both the Continuator and Genesios record a group of peoples living inside the frontiers of the caliphate. Significantly, the names appear in the two authors in a similar order, so that they were present in their common source. The Continuator speaks thus of Hagarenes, Egyptians, Indians, Persians and Assyrians (*Ἀγαρηνῶν Αἰγυπτίων, Ἰνδῶν, Περσῶν, Ἀσσυρίων*), whereas Genesios just substitutes Medes for Persians, as corresponds with his antiquarian taste, and inverts the position of the couples Egyptians–Indians and Persians–Assyrians, probably as a result of copying from a written list (*Ἀγαρηνῶν Ἰνδῶν Αἰγυπτίων Ἀσσυρίων Μήδων*).

The inclusion of these names in the list makes sense only if Thomas gained the support of the caliphate for his undertaking against Constantinople. Lemerle and

³⁹ Signes Codoñer (1995) 648–61.

⁴⁰ Turner (1990) 178–87.

⁴¹ Theoph. 350.9–10 (AM 6159). On this episode see recently Monferrer Sala (2012b).

Köpstein, who rejected the version of the *Letter to Louis* and the Arab participation in the rebellion, accordingly denied any historical value to the mention of these peoples.⁴² Now, as we have seen in section 13.1, it was with the personal support of the caliph that Thomas gathered his army. The fact that the peoples of the caliphate are named first in the list of the Continuator and Genesios apparently confirms that they formed, at least initially, the most important contingent of his troops. Köpstein speculates that the presence of such contingents in Thomas' army surely would have undermined his popularity among the population of Anatolia.⁴³ In fact, although we know almost nothing about Thomas' invasion, it does not appear to have been particularly welcome by the inhabitants of Anatolia, as we shall now see.

It may initially appear that the reference to the Indians should not to be taken literally because they lived too far away in the east to be actively involved in a campaign in Anatolia. However, it is possible that some involvement of the Indian Zutt could explain this mention. These people, mentioned in contemporary Arabic and Syrian sources, came from the Sindh and settled in the region of Basora in early Islamic times, but many of them were transferred to Syria and Cilicia in the seventh century. The Byzantines are said to have taken prisoner many Zutt in 855, when they plundered Cilicia.⁴⁴ To connect these Zutt with the Athinganoi appearing in Byzantine sources at the time is, however, unwarranted by the sources.⁴⁵

As regards the Egyptians, it must be stressed that the land of the Nile was independent from the Abbasids until Ma'mūn recovered the territory in 825–827, so that no regular troops would have come from there. However, we must not think that the caliph made a levy for supporting Thomas, like the one made by Ma'mūn in 833 when he prepared the invasion of Byzantium. Then the caliph gathered troops coming from the five districts of Syria (Damascus, Emesa, Jordan, Palestine, Qinnasrin [with Aleppo]), Jazīra and Egypt.⁴⁶ It seems more likely that the Arab support for Thomas came through the presence of soldiers of fortune coming from all parts of Muslim territory, even from territories out of the control of the caliphate, as we will see when dealing with the invasion of Crete in section 13.3. However, before we proceed further, it is perhaps advisable to look for complementary evidence in the Byzantine sources about the presence of Arab troops in Thomas' army.

Genesios tells us that Thomas' adopted son, named Konstantios, whom he qualifies as "some half-barbarous paltry fellow" (ἀνθρώπιον τι μιζοβάρβαρον), was appointed commander of a division of the Saracen army (ἀπόμοιραν ... Σαρακηνῶν στρατεύματος).⁴⁷ It could be that by "Saracen army" Genesios qualifies

⁴² Lemerle (1965) 265 note 36, 271 note 65 and 287; Köpstein (1983) 78.

⁴³ Köpstein (1983) 78–80.

⁴⁴ Ditten (1993) 201, note 582.

⁴⁵ See in any case Speck (1997).

⁴⁶ Ṭabarī III.1112, trans. Bosworth (1987) 199.

⁴⁷ Gen II.4 (26.70–74).

in a contemptuous manner the whole army of Thomas, but it is also possible that real Arab contingents are meant here.

There is more evidence for that. Theodore Stoudites was a direct witness of the miseries of the war and although he never mentions Thomas by name, he describes the harsh consequences of the conflict and labels it as “civil war” (ἐμφύλιος πόλεμος) in a letter dated by Fatouros to 823.⁴⁸ In another letter of the same year Theodore describes his flight before “the raid of the Arabs” in Bithynia (ἡ τῶν Ἀράβων ἔφοδος) and how he took refuge first on the island of Prinkipo and then in Chalkedon.⁴⁹ This passage has been generally understood as a reference to the Arab troops fighting with Thomas in the civil war, and particularly to the contingent led by Konstantios, Thomas’ adopted son.⁵⁰ In a further letter, also dated by Fatouros to 823, Theodore comforts his addressee, the abbot Sergios, who was prevented from visiting him due to the “continuous civil war” (ὕπὸ τῆς συνοχῆς τῶν ἐμφυλίων πολέμων) and “the outrages of the way” (καὶ τῆς κατὰ τὴν ὁδὸν ἐπηρείας). Theodore wishes that God would soon dissipate all these evils and reintroduce peace, freeing the subjects from the “raid of the Hagarenes” (ἀπαλλάττων τῆς τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν ἐπιδρομῆς).⁵¹ The letter is also connected by Fatouros with Thomas’ rebellion.⁵²

There are also three sermons composed by Theodore during the civil war that allude to Arab raids.⁵³ According to Roman Cholij, who studied them, they were written c. 823, when Theodore and his monks, after taking refuge for a while in the capital, returned to Crescens. Forced by this Arab raid, the Stoudites moved again elsewhere and sailed to the island of Prinkipo, where other refugees had gathered.⁵⁴ Sermon 43 admonishes the brothers who took flight out of fear of the Hagarenes (δέει τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν ἐκπεφευγότας ἡμᾶς), not to forget that God provided them with help and assistance. In sermon 99 Theodore says that although the brothers were rightfully frightened by the expedition of the Saracens (ἔξοδος τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν) as they feared to “fall into the murderous hands of the atheists” (διανοοῦμενοι μὴ ἐμπεισεῖν εἰς τὰς φονίας χεῖρας τῶν ἀθέων), they should not forget the attacks of the invisible demons. Finally, sermon 124 compares the attacks of the Hagarenes, which made the monks wander hither and thither (ἐκ τοῦ ὧδε κάκεισε περιφέρεσθαι τῇ τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν ἐπιδρομῇ), with the invisible temptations of the demons. In this sermon Theodore mentions a furious storm

⁴⁸ Theod. Stoud., *Letters*, Nr. 478; see Fatouros (1992) 438*, note 862.

⁴⁹ Theod. Stoud., *Letters*, Nr. 475. Part of the manuscript tradition reads however ἡ τῶν βαρβάρων ἔφοδος, but the reference to the Arabs is to be preferred here as it is less commonplace, whereas the reading βαρβάρων, clearly a *lectio faciliior*, could easily have arisen from a misreading.

⁵⁰ Fatouros (1992) 435, note 857 and Pratsch (1998) 272–6.

⁵¹ Theod. Stoud., *Letters*, Nr. 512.

⁵² Fatouros (1992) 460*.

⁵³ Theod. Stoud., *Parva catechesis*, nr. 43, 99 and 124.

⁵⁴ Cholij (2002) 62–3 and note 371.

at sea for three days that apparently caused many shipwrecks. This could even be an allusion to the storm that destroyed the fleet of Thomas during the siege of Constantinople.⁵⁵

There are some passages in the *Life of Saint Peter of Atroa* that also deserve attention. This *Life* was written sometime after 843 by the monk Sabas of the St. Zacharias monastery at the foot of Mt. Olympos. The author describes many miracles of his hero, Peter of Atroa, which took place during the reign of Michael II.⁵⁶ Sabas was a direct witness to some of them and even the main protagonist, so his testimony deserves to be given some attention. As the civil war is the frame for many of his stories, Sabas refers explicitly to it on several occasions.⁵⁷ In §34 he mentions for the first time the civil war taking place at the time (ἐμφυλίου πολέμου ὄντος κατ' ἐκείνο καιροῦ), and Thomas, whom he qualifies as usurper (τοῦ τυράννου Θωμᾶ) and hated by God (τοῦ θεοστουγούς Θωμᾶ). The same terms recur in §39, when he mentions a notary who took part in the war at Thomas' side (πρὸς τὸν ἐμφύλιον ἐκείνον πόλεμον τοῦ τυράννου Θωμᾶ ἀπελθῶν). Further on in the same chapter, an officer "is taken captive with some other men by the Hagarenes in a fighting" (ἐν μιᾷ πολέμου παρεμβολῇ μετὰ καὶ ἄλλων τινῶν ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν πιασθεῖς). The next episode, still in the same chapter, refers only vaguely to the defeat of a senator in a fight (ἐν παρεμβολῇ πολέμου ἡττώμενος) and his ensuing flight pursued by the enemy. That the civil war is always referred to is made clear in §41 where the author writes: "an army of the enemies fell upon them in the days of confusion, civil war and plundering" (ἐν ἡμέραις συγχύσεως, ἐμφυλίου πολέμου τε καὶ διαρπαγῆς ἐπέστη αὐτοῖς λαὸς τῶν ἐναντίων). Some chapters on, in §48, Sabas in person tells us that one day the monks commented in the refectory: "a multitude of Ismaelites has decided to march against the Roman land and enslave it" (ὡς πλῆθος Ἰσμαηλιτῶν κατὰ τῆς ῥωμαϊκῆς βεβούλευται ἐξελεῖν χώρας καὶ ταύτην αἰχμαλωτίσαι). Sabas was terrified by this eventuality and even thought of fleeing to Constantinople. Finally, in §62 a peasant mentions that the army of the impious has been ravaging his land for three years (τριετῆς χρόνος ἐστίν, ὅτι πλῆθος τῶν μυσαρῶν λυμαίνεται τὴν χώραν ταύτην). As all of these events took place in the northwest part of Asia Minor during the reign of Michael II, it is clear that Sabas is always referring to the civil war of Thomas, for there was no other invasion of the territory in these years. The Arabs, alluded to as Hagarenes or Ismaelites in Sabas' narrative, were accordingly almost certainly involved in Thomas' usurpation.

We have no reason to reject this evidence of Arab participation in Thomas' attacks as the result of some kind of propaganda against the rebels, for there was in fact no motive for Theodore Stoudites or Sabas to follow the iconoclastic emperor Michael II on this point. Thus it seems that the existence of Arabs

⁵⁵ Th. Cont. II.14 (60.11–13) and Gen. II.5 (28.56–57).

⁵⁶ For an assessment and a list of Peter's miracles see Efthymiadis (2006).

⁵⁷ Sabas, *Life of Peter of Atroa* (1), §§34, 39, 41, 48 and 62.

alongside the eastern troops at Thomas' side could have been one of the main reasons for the manifest hostility towards Thomas displayed by all the iconophile sources. It is therefore not coincidence that the last partisans of Thomas again took refuge in the caliphate when their defeat seemed inescapable.⁵⁸

One can perhaps only be surprised by the routine mention of these Arab contingents in Thomas' uprising. Was not greater stress on this fact to be expected in the sources? However, Arab inroads into Anatolia were not unusual at the time. Moreover, a piece of information provided by Michael the Syrian confirms that the Arabs might fight alongside the Byzantine troops if circumstances required. According to the chronicler, Michael II freed the Arab prisoners who were under his power and promised to clear their way to return home provided they would fight the rebels along with the imperial troops.⁵⁹ Apparently the prisoners accepted and with their help Michael defeated and captured Thomas. It does not matter if this story is factually correct, only that it was held to be credible at the time.

But we can go even further and consider whether the participation of Arabs alongside Thomas' troops could have been related to other events of the time in which Arabs took a prominent role. This leads us to consider carefully the circumstances of the invasion of Crete by the Arabs at the beginning of the 820s.

13.3 The Arab Conquest of Crete

The invasion of Crete, generally dated between 824 and 828, is attributed to Andalusian emigrants who had taken and ruled Alexandria in previous years and were forced by Ma'mūn to leave the city c. 825–827.⁶⁰ As the civil war practically ended in 823 with Thomas' death, scholars have considered the Arab invasion of Crete to be a consequence of the conflict,⁶¹ which left the victorious Michael without the military resources for coping with the new invaders coming from Alexandria. However, as I think to have proved in a recent study, the occupation of Crete by the Arabs began probably during the civil war and the Andalusian emigrants were not the only force behind it.⁶² Let us review the evidence briefly.

According to our most detailed source, the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, written in Arabic by Ibn Mufarrij at the end of the eleventh century

⁵⁸ Th. Cont. II.20 (71.21–73.4). See Signes Codoñer (1995) 283–7.

⁵⁹ Mich. Syr. 501, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 37.

⁶⁰ See the studies of Brooks (1913) or Tsougarakis (1998) 39–41, who plead for 828, whereas the most influential book of Christides (1984) considers that the island was already occupied by the Andalusians in 824.

⁶¹ See for example Köpstein (1983) 86.

⁶² For a detailed analysis of the sources, mainly in Arabic, that bear on the occupation of Crete by the Andalusians and its dating to c. 820, see Signes Codoñer (2004a) 186–99.

(although traditionally attributed to an earlier Coptic writer, Severus Ibn Muqaffa, known to be dead in 987), the occupation of Alexandria by the Andalusians had already taken place in 814.⁶³ They were reinforced in the following years by new incomers from Andalusia, especially after the uprising of Cordoba against the Andalusian emir in 818 that ended with the exile of many of the participants in the revolt, as is stated in many Arabic sources. In fact, al-Andalus was experiencing a turbulent period at the beginning of the ninth century with many regions in the Levante (the eastern part of the Iberian peninsula) acting autonomously from Cordoba and living on piracy.⁶⁴ What we see therefore in the second decade of the ninth century is a displacement of the Andalusian piracy to the eastern Mediterranean accompanied by a phenomenon of mass migration of many impoverished Andalusians dissatisfied with the government of Cordoba. These groups ruled Alexandria with the support of the local population for many years, for the Abbasids left a void of power in Egypt in the ten years that followed the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd in 809, when the caliphate plunged into a civil war between his heirs. In fact, the delta and the area of Fuṣṭāṭ were practically independent under their own leaders (Jarawī and Sarī) when the Andalusians arrived in Alexandria. The caliph Ma'mūn was only able to reinforce his authority in Alexandria and also Lower Egypt between 825 and 827.

The Andalusians were then forced to leave Alexandria and, according to the sources, established themselves in Crete. But there is no indication that they *conquered* Crete by then, after being expelled from Alexandria. If we read the sources attentively, the expelled Andalusians of Alexandria *established themselves* in Crete after leaving the city of the delta. As they had been pillaging and plundering many islands in the eastern Mediterranean in previous years, at least since 814, it is likely that they had attacked the island before, if not conquered it. What the caliph offered them in 825–827 was to retire to an island, namely Crete, which was already under Muslim control. In the recently recovered manuscript of the lost history of Ibn Ḥayyān (988–1076), perhaps the most influential Arabic historian of al-Andalus, we can read a passage of the history of Ibn al-Qūṭīyya (†977), the “Son of the Goth woman”, that is quite revealing in this context (*italics are mine*):

[The Andalusians] remained there [in Alexandria] until the governor of the Abbasids in Egypt agreed with them a peaceful exit, as he offered them the possibility to choose any island for settling there, with the necessary aid for that. They chose Crete in the Mediterranean, *that the Greeks had abandoned at the time,*

⁶³ Ibn Mufarrij, *History of the patriarchs*, part 4, 429–65. For a short rendering of its content, see Signes Codoñer (2004a) 183–4. For the doubts about the authorship of Severus Ibn Muqaffa, see Heijer (1989) and Scott Meisami and Starkey (1998) s.v. “Ibn Mufarrij”.

⁶⁴ For Andalusian piracy in the west Mediterranean at the beginning of the ninth century, and especially the Balearic islands, see Signes Codoñer (2004a) 177–82 and (2005) 66–78.

and they all moved there, habiting and cultivating the land *with the contribution of people who came from everywhere*. And they remain there until now.⁶⁵

Certainly Ibn al-Qūṭīyya is a later author, but this does not mean that he is unreliable, though we do not know the sources he used. As matter of fact, the information provided by this passage makes sense, for the choice to settle in Crete given by the Abbasid governor to the Andalusians would have been no real option for them if the island had in fact continued to be ruled by the Byzantines. But this was apparently not the case, for the Greeks, according to Ibn al-Qūṭīyya, had already left the island. Obviously, the island was not bereft of its Greek population and lying deserted before the invaders. Crete had probably only been abandoned by the Byzantine troops and officials and was occupied by new masters. We do not know who they were, but the indication provided by the text that the Andalusians occupied the island “with the contribution of people who came from everywhere” refers undoubtedly to the other Arabs who settled there not only after, but more likely before the arrival of the Andalusians. These Arabs could have been in part Andalusian pirates, who were raiding the islands of the eastern Mediterranean, even before their settlement in Alexandria in 814. But they were also, as the text says, Arabs of other regions, coming from everywhere – just like Thomas’ allies. Just a coincidence? Perhaps not, as we will see.

When could these Arabs have taken the island before the definitive settlement of the Andalusians there, c. 825–827? Theoretically, we can choose any year between 814 and 825, for the sources provide us with no exact dating. But the most likely possibility is that the take-over of the island was related to the war between Thomas and Michael.

According to the Continuator, notice of the occupation of the island reached Michael without much delay (χρόνος δὲ ἐρρήν πολύς οὐδαμῶς), who sent straight away the protospatharios Photeinos (Φωτεινός), apparently with a small contingent, with the task of “settling the whole matter in Crete” (τὰ τῆς Κρήτης ἅπαντα διοικεῖν). When Photeinos, who was by then strategos of the Anatolics, came to Crete, he saw the difficulties and informed Michael of them, requesting an adequate force to face the Arabs. Michael then sent the protostrator Damianos, also protospatharios, with a large contingent (μετὰ πολλῆς δυνάμεως καὶ παρασκευῆς). However, both Byzantine commanders were defeated by the invaders and narrowly escaped death.⁶⁶

Warren Treadgold rightly remarked: “the strategos of the Anatolics would hardly have been sent if the strategoi of the Kibyrrhaiots, Peloponnesos, or Kephalonia had been available, nor would the protostrator have led a fleet out of Constantinople if the drungarios of the Imperial Fleet had not been absent”.

⁶⁵ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, f. 107r, trans. in Makki and Corriente (2001) 65–66. For this work see Chapter 18.2. The last sentence indicates that the author is writing before 963, when Crete was finally re-conquered by the Byzantines.

⁶⁶ Th. Cont. II.22 (76.7–77.3). This information is lacking in Genesisios.

However, he inferred from this circumstance that “Crete was invaded when most of the empire’s navy was in Sicily”.⁶⁷ As the Arabs had invaded Sicily in support of the usurper Euphemios perhaps as early as 827, Treadgold considers that the imperial fleet was sent by 828 to help the imperial loyalists to face the invasion. Accordingly, the expedition of Photeinos was also in 828.

However, this date is too late for the expedition of Photeinos and Damianos, because the Arabs had seized Crete before 825 and both commanders seem to have set off for the island immediately after its invasion. In effect, that the strategos of the Anatolics was first sent to inspect the island without adequate forces reveals that the emperor in Constantinople did not know exactly the situation in Crete at the time, probably because the invasion had just taken place.⁶⁸ If we follow this dating, it is clear that the imperial fleet was not in Sicily at the time of the invasion of Crete, for troubles did not begin in Sicily before 826.

Moreover, according to the Continuator, Photeinos was sent to Sicily as strategos after being defeated in Crete.⁶⁹ No dating is unfortunately provided for his new office. Nuwayrī, a late Arabic writer (†1332), names “F-s-t-i-n, surnamed the Suda” the strategos of Sicily killed by the rebel Euphemios c. 827, in a first phase of the conflict, before Euphemios sought support for his usurpation among the Arabs in Africa.⁷⁰ This strategos is generally named Constantine in the other Arabic sources and this seems to be correct, for some lead seals from the beginning of the ninth century have been preserved of a protospatharios of this name acting as strategos of Sicily. However, an identification of Photeinos with Constantine has been attempted on various occasions, without much success.⁷¹ If Constantine was also imperial protospatharios and archon of Crete, as suggested by a further lead seal dating from the beginning of the ninth century, this would reinforce the identification, for it makes a very curious parallel between the careers of Constantine and Photeinos.⁷² But only if Photeinos were a family name and not

⁶⁷ Treadgold (1988) 253–4 and 429, note 353.

⁶⁸ A dating of the expedition as late as 853, as Brooks (1913) argued, is accordingly to be absolutely disregarded. More arguments for an early dating of the expedition of Photeinos, also defended by Treadgold, are considered in Signes Codoñer (1995) 299–311.

⁶⁹ Th. Cont. II.22 (77.1–3): ἀλλ’ οὗτος μὲν ἐπεὶ διὰ τμηῆς ἤγετο παρὰ τοῦ βασιλέως ἀεὶ, τὴν τῆς Σικελίας στρατηγίδα αὐθις τῆς Κρήτης ἀλλάσσειται.

⁷⁰ Nuwayrī 427, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 379. For the various spellings of the name of the strategos (including Fstīn), see Amari (1857) 427, note 2 and (1854) 374, note 1. For the usurpation of Euphemios see Prigent (2006).

⁷¹ See for example my attempt in Signes Codoñer (1995) 302–6 to explain the common name of Constantine in Arabic (Q-s-t-n-tin) as a corruption of the most unusual (F-s-tin) of the manuscript of Nuwayrī. According to this supposition, the lead seals of strategos Constantine belonged to an earlier strategos of that name active in 805 in Sicily. In fact Constantine has always been a very common name and the office of the strategos of Sicily seems to have fluctuated a great deal at the time. For an identification of Photeinos with Constantine see also Vasiliev (1935) 67, note 1 and Bury (1912) 479.

⁷² See Kislinger and Seibt (1998) 21–3, esp. note 77.

a personal name would the identification be easier, and the fact that Constantine was surnamed the Suda seems to rule out this possibility.⁷³ On balance, we can say that any identification of Photeinos with the strategos who faced the rebellion of Euphemios c. 826–827 will remain tentative for the moment. No sure evidence can be obtained in this way for an exact dating of the Cretan expedition of Photeinos.

Nevertheless, and coming back to Treadgold's argument, it is clear that some circumstance other than the Sicilian rebellion (which did not begin until 827) must have impeded Michael from sending the fleet of the Kibyrrhaiotai and Greece, or even the imperial fleet, to face the Arab invasion of Crete. This is remarkable insofar as the island of Crete was easily approached from the neighbouring coast of Asia Minor, where the thema of the Kibyrrhaiotai had its seat. Therefore Michael must surely have been hindered from bringing aid to the Cretans by a serious and grave crisis, precisely like the one caused by Thomas' usurpation.

As is well known, the thematic fleet of the Kibyrrhaiotai fell into Thomas' hands at the beginning of the rebellion (τοῦ θεματικοῦ στόλου γίνεται ἐγκρατής).⁷⁴ With its aid Thomas besieged Constantinople, defended by the imperial fleet. However, the initial successes of Thomas turned into failures in 822, as his army was defeated before the walls of Constantinople and the fleet dispersed and deserted to Michael before entering into combat with the imperial triremes (οὕτω μὲν οὖν ἀπονητὶ διελύθη τὸ ναυτικὸν καὶ τέως ἐχώρησεν εἰς οὐδέν).⁷⁵ The Continuator also says that Thomas, after the destruction of this thematic fleet by the imperial dromons, ordered the Greek fleet to be brought swiftly to Constantinople (τὸ προσχοριάζον κατὰ τὴν Ἑλλάδα ναυτικὸν ταχέως κελεύων ἀναχθῆναι)⁷⁶ in order to continue its blockade. But these ships were destroyed by the imperial fleet. After the defeat of Thomas by the Bulgarian khan Omurtag and the surrender of the rest of his fleet (τὸ καταλειφθὲν ναυτικὸν) to the emperor,⁷⁷ Thomas ended the sea blockade of Constantinople in the winter 822–823 and retired to Thrace.

It is at this point, in the year 822, if not even before, when Thomas had set off for Constantinople with the fleet, that the Arabs could have invaded the island of Crete, which lay completely abandoned by the thematic fleet of the Kibyrrhaiotai, and Greece, and could not be helped by the imperial fleet that remained at Constantinople busy with the troops of Thomas, who was campaigning in neighbouring Thrace. The surveillance of the coast was crucial for the emperor

⁷³ Although Photeinos is known as a personal name, it is not unusual in Byzantium to see personal names acting also as family names. Family names are very rare in the ninth century, but the case of Photeinos is particular, for the Continuator says that he was the great-grandfather of the empress Zoe, who married Leo VI. This is another reason for supposing that the Continuator, who wrote during the reign of Leo's son Constantine VII, used a well-informed source for the expedition of Photeinos.

⁷⁴ Th. Cont. II.13 (55.19–20). See Signes Codoñer (1995) 247–8.

⁷⁵ Th. Cont. II.15 (62.16–17).

⁷⁶ Th. Cont. II.16 (63.21–22).

⁷⁷ Th. Cont. II.18 (66.11).

at this point, for he wanted to prevent reinforcements for Thomas coming from Anatolia. It is also at this time that Michael could have begun to take control again of the Anatolikoi thema and have sent its strategos Photeinos to Crete in order to make a first urgent assessment of the nature and extent of the Arab invasion of the island. This appointment is understandable, for the fleet of the Kibyrrhaiotai was at the time non-existent, having been used by Thomas to blockade Constantinople. Therefore, when Photeinos demanded reinforcements to face the invaders, the emperor sent soldiers (perhaps already in 823) and, logically, some ships from the capital, but not under the command of the droungarios of the fleet, for he was to remain at his side in Constantinople to fight Thomas' partisans at Thrace. The contingent was in the end inappropriate to fight the Arabs of Crete and was accordingly defeated. Michael did not, however, lose time, for he sent another representative to bring in order the thema of the Kibyrrhaiotai.

We know of this appointment through the *Life of Saint Antonios the Younger*, written at the end of the ninth century by someone who claimed to have been an eyewitness of the later life of the saint, who died in 865.⁷⁸ There it is said that when the saint was living in Attaleia, the capital of the thema of the Kibyrrhaiotai, "the fleet with its patrician arrived and all the notables of the city came to meet the commander with the customary arrangement".⁷⁹ The new commander fixed his eyes upon the saint and recommended him to the emperor, who appointed him *ἐκ προσώπου* (*ekprosopou*) of the thema of the Kibyrrhaiotai.⁸⁰ Thereafter the author describes how the saint, named John at the time, carried out the duties of his office, prosecuting the people who had supported the usurper Thomas.⁸¹ This indication gives us the terminus post quem for the appointment of John to the office of *ἐκ προσώπου*: the end of the civil war. But I think we can be more precise. The arrival of the fleet, welcomed by the people according to custom, looks like the return of the imperial authority in the area just after the defeat of Thomas. In fact, the appointment of John as *ἐκ προσώπου* among the local population speaks for the will of the new authorities to set up a new administration in the thema, probably because the old one had completely collapsed. The cleansing of Thomas' partisans was the immediate task of the new officers, including the *ἐκ προσώπου* John, as we see in his *Life*. I would hypothetically date all these events to the years 823–824, when Michael was regaining control of western Asia Minor.

This dating is important, for the invasion of Crete must have taken place earlier than that. In fact, a massive invasion of Crete by the Arabs, like the one

⁷⁸ Malamut (1993) 249–251 and Brubaker and Haldon (2001) 207–8.

⁷⁹ *Life of Antonios the Younger* §10: κατέλαβεν ὁ στόλος μετὰ τοῦ ἑαυτῶν πατρικίου, τῶν οὖν ἐξεχόντων τῆς πόλεως μετὰ τῆς ἐξ ἔθους καταστάσεως εἰς ἀπαντὴν ἐλληλοθῶτων τοῦ ἄρχοντος.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* §11: ἀναφέρει τῷ βασιλεῖ Μιχαῆλ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ καθίσταται ἐκ προσώπου εἰς τὸ τῶν Κιβυρραιωτῶν θέμα.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* §12: τοὺς γὰρ κατ' ἐκεῖνο καιροῦ τῷ ἀποστάτῃ καὶ λαοπλάνῳ προσφθαρέντας Θωμᾶ καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην, ὡς εἰπεῖν, ἀναστῶσαντας

envisaged by the sources, was possible insofar as the imperial authority had collapsed in the thema of the Kibyrrhaiotai, which usually had available a mighty fleet strategically situated at the entrance of the Aegean Sea to prevent invaders coming from the east. The fleet was also situated quite near the island of Crete, which could be easily reached from the southwest coast of Asia Minor. I think, accordingly, that the Arabs invaded Crete first c. 822, profiting from the lack of an imperial fleet in Greece and the thema of the Kibyrrhaiotai, as the last ships there had departed northwards in 822 to support Thomas' blockade of Constantinople. As I also suspect that these Arabs were not only Andalusian pirates, but also allies of Thomas involved in some way in his usurpation, they could have landed in the island even before that date, taking advantage of their alliance with the usurper. They seized the opportunity to plunder and invade the southern islands of the Aegean Sea, departing perhaps from Cyprus. The reestablishment of the imperial authority in the area c. 823–824 could have prevented such an invasion, so it must have begun earlier. The imperial government tried to regain control of the island as soon as troops were available in Constantinople, sending a hasty and ill-prepared expedition under the command of Photeinos and Damianos, who could not rely on the support of the thematic fleet at Attaleia. The second naval expedition sent by Michael to expel the Arabs from Crete was already led by the strategos of the thema of the Kibyrrhaiotai, Krateros, perhaps the same man who appointed John ἐκ προσώπου in the *Life of Antonios the Younger*.⁸²

This close connection between the civil war and the invasion of Crete seems not only likely, but is indeed explicitly stated in the Byzantine sources, especially the Continuator and Genesis. Both authors refer to the invasion of Crete immediately after the civil war in their narratives. But they also establish a causal link between the two events. Genesis says that the Arabs plundered Roman possessions with impunity “while Thomas’ rebellion was raging” (ἐπὶ χρόνου δὲ ἐν ᾧ ἀποστασία προβεβήκει ἢ Θωμᾶ).⁸³ He then mentions the invasion of Crete by the Arabs led by Abū Ḥafṣ and how they conquered all the cities of the island, one after another. After that, there comes a clear statement by Genesis about the responsibilities of the war: “Thomas was responsible for the invasion and capture of the cities” (ὅν τῆς ἐπιδρομῆς ὁ Θωμᾶς καὶ ἀλωσεως αἴτιος).⁸⁴

The Continuator is even more precise. After surveying all the calamities that befell the empire during the civil war in a rhetorical list that includes killings, fires, earthquakes, rapes and so on, he mentions last of all the attacks on the islands (in plural), which he considers a strike in the middle of the empire's defences. He then begins the narration of events, stating that the attack of the Spaniards on the

⁸² For the expedition of Krateros see Th. Cont. II. 25 (79.13–81.5) and Gen. II.12 (34.36–60). The expedition is dated by both chroniclers to the reign of Michael II and there is no reason to question it. For a discussion on the dating and further bibliography see Signes Codoñer (1995) 323–8. For the *Life of Antonios the Younger* see also the Epilogue.

⁸³ Gen. II.10 (32.81).

⁸⁴ Gen. II 10 (33.21).

islands began “when the uprising of Thomas had just begun” (ἄρτι δὲ τοῦ κατὰ τὸν Θωμᾶν ἄρξαντος νεωτερισμοῦ).⁸⁵ After describing at some length the misery and poverty of the Spaniards in their native country, the Continuator says that their leader Abū Ḥafṣ began raiding the “Byzantine islands lying in the east” (τῶν πρὸς τῇ ἕφ κειμένων νήσων καὶ ἡμετέρων τυγχανόντων).⁸⁶ And then he adds:

After he [Abū Ḥafṣ] approached many islands, as he found no force whatsoever opposing him either with little or big ships, because all islands were devoid of their help as they had just set sail with Thomas to help him at Constantinople, he finally arrived at the land of the Cretans, having taken and obtained much benefit from all the islands where he had anchored.⁸⁷

The indication that the Byzantine ships had just (ἄρτι) departed for Constantinople, leaving the southern islands of the Aegean without any effective defence against the invaders, confirms the close connection between the invasion of Crete and the siege of Constantinople in 821–822/3. However, there is no word in the Continuator or Genesisios of other Arabs taking part in this conquest of Crete, so we cannot conclude from their texts that the Andalusians were in fact reinforced by Arabs coming from other regions and allied with Thomas. Unfortunately we do not have any other secure evidence about the Arab raids against the Aegean islands at this time that is of any help in our quest. In the *Life of Athanasia of Aegina*, written at the earliest at the end of the ninth century, but preserving original information about the island of the saint,⁸⁸ there is mention of “barbarian Maurousioi” (Μαυρουσιῶν βαρβάρων) plundering Aegina at the beginning of the ninth century.⁸⁹ The term “Maurousioi” refers undoubtedly to North African Moors or Berbers (as most of the Andalusians were), but no exact dating of this raid upon Aegina can be gained through the *Life*. Even an early date such as 807 is possible. Nevertheless, the term seems to point again to Andalusian pirates, excluding Arabs from other areas.

We find a solution to the problem if we consider that the Spaniards coming from Alexandria appeared first in the south Aegean as allies of Thomas. As we saw above, Egyptians are named among Thomas’ supporters during the civil war. As Egypt was not controlled by the caliphate until 825–827, it could be

⁸⁵ Th. Cont. II.20 (73.13–14.).

⁸⁶ Th. Cont. II.20 (74.9–10).

⁸⁷ Th. Cont. II.20 (74.13–18): ἐπει γοῦν πολλαῖς τῶν νήσων πλησιάζων τὸν ἀντιπαραταττόμενον μικρῶ ἢ μεγάλῳ πλοίῳ οὐχ εὔρισκεν, ἐχρηρῶντο γὰρ πᾶσαι τῆς αὐτῶν βοήθειας ἄρτι κατὰ τῆς Κωνσταντινουπόλεως ἐκβοηθουσῶν τε καὶ πλεουσῶν μετὰ τοῦ Θωμᾶ, μεγάλας δὲ ὠφελείας ἐκ πασῶν, αἷς καὶ προσώρμιζεν, ἐκαρποῦτό τε καὶ ἐλάμβανεν, ἦκε καὶ πρὸς τοὺς Κρηταιεῖς.

⁸⁸ See Carras (1984) 199–211, Sherry (1996) 137–41 and Brubaker and Haldon (2001) 208.

⁸⁹ *Life of Athanasia of Aegina* §3, trans. Sherry (1996) 143.

that many Arabs there, perhaps mainly the newcomers from al-Andalus, threw in their lot with Thomas' uprising. If so, the list of nations supporting Thomas provided by the Continuator and Genesios would prove to be right in this regard.

We can therefore conclude that Thomas' revolt must not be considered only as a Byzantine internal struggle. Contemporaries labelled the conflict a "civil war", as we saw above, but they did not exclude the presence of Arab contingents in Thomas' army. There must have also been irregular fighters among them. This supposition is reinforced if we assume the explicit connection made by Byzantine sources between the war and the capture of Crete. Most important, the outbreak of civil war cannot be disentangled from the arrival of Ma'mūn in Baghdad in 819, after years of civil strife and internal quarrels in the caliphate. This being established, it is perhaps now time to consider the degree of involvement of the caliph in these events.

13.4 The Strategy of the Caliph

In Chapter 5.2 we quoted a passage from Michael the Syrian, where the chronicler informs us about a failed alliance between the Arab chieftain Naṣr ibn Shabath, who controlled the Jazīra as an independent ruler, and the Byzantine emperor.⁹⁰ In the account, Naṣr ibn Shabath proposes an alliance with the emperor through the agency of Manuel the Armenian at a very precise moment, when Ma'mūn "was about to come to Baghdad", therefore in 819. Leo the Armenian was reigning at the time, but it was apparently only shortly after Thomas' uprising started that the Byzantines decided to take this offer seriously. Michael the Syrian says that Michael of Amorion then sent ambassadors to Naṣr, perhaps at the very beginning of his reign, early in 821. However, the alliance came to nothing, because the followers of Naṣr were furious with him when they were told of the projected alliance and accused him of being an apostate. Thus Naṣr, probably to preserve his ascendancy over his men, massacred the Byzantine envoys.

This story is highly significant for us for two reasons. First, it proves that the coming of Ma'mūn to Baghdad in 819 was considered by many autonomous rulers inside the Abbasid caliphate as a direct challenge to their power. They went so far as to consider an alliance with their natural foes, the Byzantines. But it also prevents us from considering that the autonomy of these local forces from the central government at Baghdad could be interpreted as a sign of weakness of the caliphate, for when the time arrived most of these local chieftains remained faithful to Islam and could thus be eventually mobilized against Byzantium.

When Ma'mūn returned to Baghdad in 819, after years of hesitation, he was probably conscious of the situation of the caliphate and also of the ambivalent fidelity of some of the local chieftains who had prospered as a result of internal

⁹⁰ Mich. Syr. 500–501, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 36–7. For the episode see Treadgold (1988) note 311.

conflict during the previous decade. In fact, since the death of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd in January of 809 the caliphate had plunged into a series of civil wars and regional conflicts that threatened the authority of the caliph at Baghdad. Certainly, the process had already begun in the far west in the middle of the eighth century when the rest of the Umayyads established independent power in al-Andalus. But the first decades of the ninth century saw the rise of local powers who acted on their own behalf, allowing local tensions to erupt into open warfare.

The first conflict arose because of the arrangements Hārūn al-Rashīd made for his succession, for he appointed his son Amīn as caliph but also left his other son Ma'mūn in charge of Khurāsān as far west as Hamadhān. The latent conflict between the two sons of Hārūn soon resulted in open war and ended only with the defeat and death of Amīn after a long and devastating siege of Baghdad by Ma'mūn's army from August 812 to September 813. This "war between the brothers" not only ended in a tragic way, but was a fatal blow to the unity of the caliphate. Hugh Kennedy describes thus the far-reaching consequences of Amīn's execution:

No member of the family had been publicly killed or execrated since the revolution. Now that inviolability had gone. If it could happen once, it could happen again and the prestige of the caliphs had been seriously damaged. But more than the charisma of the sovereign had been injured. The state, so carefully built up by Mansur and nurtured by his son and grandsons, had torn itself apart. The old system had gone forever.⁹¹

The rift opened during the civil war between the different factions of the western "Arabs" and the eastern "Persians" did not disappear after 813, but even widened, for Ma'mūn remained in distant Khurāsān, apparently unconcerned by the problems of the western provinces or, as some historians think, isolated by his main adviser, Faḍl ibn Sahl, who did not inform him about the events in Iraq and Baghdad.⁹² There, discontent continued to grow and reached a peak when on 25 March 817 Ma'mūn appointed 'Alī ibn Mūsā ibn Ja'far, the 'Alid, called al-Riḍā, as his heir and successor to the caliphate.⁹³ We will briefly consider in Chapter 22 the reasons behind this decision and the apocalyptic fears of the pious Ma'mūn. For now it suffices to remark that this support of a shiite heir for the caliphate

⁹¹ Kennedy (1981) 148.

⁹² Sourdel (1959) vol. 1, 196–213 clearly shows that when Ma'mūn's almighty vizier Faḍl ibn Sahl was killed in a bath by hired assassins in February 818 (for this see Ṭabarī III.1027, trans. Bosworth [1987] 80), the caliph, who had probably ordered his assassination, decided from this moment on to concentrate all the power in his own hands and not to rely further on viziers. In fact, seven more "viziers" served under Ma'mūn from 818 until his death in 833, but none of them appears to have had the extensive powers of their predecessor. Ma'mūn's return to Baghdad in 819 is therefore a further step in his plans for restoring his effective power in the caliphate.

⁹³ Madelung (1981).

infuriated the Baghdadis, who proclaimed counter-caliph Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī on 24 July 817. Civil war began anew, and although Faḍl ibn Sahl was executed in February 818 and Riḍā died suddenly (poisoned?) some months later during the summer, the conflict ended only when Ma'mūn entered Baghdad in August 819, putting an end to the caliphate of Ibrāhīm.

Ma'mūn was now in Baghdad but he did not control many western territories of the caliphate. To begin with, in the far west Maghrib many new dynasties, such as the Idrisids, Rustamids and Aghlabids, had been established since the end of the eighth century and acted independently from Baghdad. Certainly the Aghlabids, for instance, recognized Abbasid sovereignty, but they also faced internal rebellions (one of them in the 820s) that aimed at their overthrow and could only escape from these dynamics by launching a campaign against Sicily led by a respected religious scholar who had been critical of the Aghlabid rule.⁹⁴ The Byzantines, who were masters of the whole of Sicily before the Aghlabid invasion and had some influence over Sardinia⁹⁵ (and through it perhaps even over the Balearics),⁹⁶ made good use of the de facto independence of these emirates, for after Berber pirates from Spain plundered the west basin of the Mediterranean c. 813 we are informed of alliances and diplomatic exchanges between Constantinople and these powers regardless of Baghdad.⁹⁷

Egypt was also independent of the Abbasids. We have already seen above in section 13.3 the case of the city of Alexandria, from where the conquerors of Crete came. The rest of the country was divided between 'Alī al-Jarawī in the north and the 'Ubaydallāh ibn al-Sarī in Fustāṭ, amidst rebellions of the Coptic population. It is only in 832, as we shall see in Chapter 14.3, that Ma'mun was able to recover control of the territory.⁹⁸

Most of Syria also challenged the authority of Baghdad over many years. As early as September 811, Abū al-'Amayṭar, an Umayyad of the Sufyanid branch of the family, proclaimed himself caliph at Damascus against Amīn. The Sufyanid caliph was defeated in 812/813 by the army of the Qaysite Arab Ibn Bayhas on behalf of Ma'mūn, but this did not hinder a further uprising in the following year by another Umayyad in the Jordan area.⁹⁹ As a matter of fact, all the region, where the ancient capital of the Umayyads lay, viewed with diffidence and mistrust the government from Baghdad and there was practically everywhere a focus on

⁹⁴ For the Aghlabids see Talbi (1966); for the Rustamids see Zerouki (1987); for the Idrisids the short overview in Abitbol (2009), esp. 40–54. For a documented overview of the history of all these imamates and emirates of the Maghrib and their ruling dynasties see Manzano Moreno (2011) 593–613.

⁹⁵ Corrias and Cosentino (2002).

⁹⁶ Signes Codoñer (2005).

⁹⁷ Talbi (1966) 396–403, Manzano Moreno (1998) 216–18 and Signes Codoñer (2004a) 180–82.

⁹⁸ See Kennedy (1998) and Brett (2011) for early Muslim Egypt.

⁹⁹ Madelung (2000).

rebellion. The most important of them was in the Jazīra region, pillaged over many years by the aforementioned Naṣr ibn Shabath beginning in 812.¹⁰⁰

The neighbouring Azerbaijan and more distant Tabaristan, to the south of the Caspian sea, also lifted the banner of rebellion against the caliphate, but now for a different reason. The region was weakly Islamized and many of its Persian inhabitants sympathized with the Khurramite movement, which has been defined as “a reformed branch of new Mazdakism adjusted to Islamic patterns” and was in a certain sense a consequence of the conciliatory politics toward Shia and Zoroastrians adopted in Khurāsān since the days of Abū Muslim, one of the leaders of the Abbasid revolution.¹⁰¹ The leader of the Persian Khurramite in Azerbaijan could assert the independence of the region of Badkhdh between 816 and 838. There were also uprisings of the Khurramite in Iṣfahān and Fars during this period.

Finally, we must mention the focus of ‘Alid rebellion in south Iraq and Yemen, and even the election of an anti-caliph in Yemen and Ḥijāz.¹⁰²

Tayeb El Hibri has recently summarized the situation thus:

When al-Ma’mūn began the new phase of his rule from Baghdad, only the eastern provinces of the empire were politically stable. Nearly all the others had lapsed, in varying degrees of autonomy, from ‘Abbasid rule. Egypt had broken up into two districts ruled by competing commanders, ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn al-Sariyy in the south and ‘Alī al-Jarawīyy in the north. Syria had fallen to local tribal rivalries in which a Qaysī strongman, ‘Abd Allah ibn Bayhas, emerged as a leader. Al-Jazīra had fallen under the sway of another ambitious Qaysī chief, Naṣr ibn Shabath al-‘Uqaylī, while Yemen drifted under various ‘Alid rebellions, first led by Ibrahīm ibn Mūsā ibn Ja’far al-Ṣādiq in 199–202/814–817, and later resumed by another ‘Alid rebel, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Aḥmad, in 206/821. Most dangerous of all was the heterodox movement of Bābak al-Khurramī, who, starting in 201/816, took control of the mountainous region of Azerbaijan and Armenia and declared an open war against Islam and Arab rule. Reunifying these diverse provinces demanded a kind of military force that was not available to al-Ma’mūn at the time, so for the next decade he used a mix of diplomacy and incremented conquest to restore his control of the empire.¹⁰³

Thus the caliphate seems to have lost control over its western territories from the beginning of the ninth century. Ma’mūn must have been aware of the danger and also of the deals the Byzantines could eventually make with local powers to the detriment of the caliphate, as had already happened with the Aghlabids and

¹⁰⁰ Cobb (2001) and Humphreys (2011) 528–35.

¹⁰¹ For this definition see Amoretti (1975) 503–19, esp. 503. See further Yarshater (1983), Madelung (1986) and (1988) 1–12. See also Chapter 9.

¹⁰² See a detailed account in Ṭabarī III.987–996, trans. Bosworth (1987) 28–39.

¹⁰³ Hibri (2011) 286–7.

was even attempted with Naṣr ibn Shabath. How dangerous the situation could turn out to be for Baghdad if these contacts continued is made evident by the pact established between the Khurramites and the Byzantines during the reign of Theophilos, as we saw in Chapters 9–11.

Accordingly, the caliph, whose main purpose was the unification of the caliphate and recentralization of the power,¹⁰⁴ may have decided to support the usurpation of Thomas as a way to solve two problems at once. First, he kept the Byzantines busy facing the invasion of a usurper who had many supporters in Anatolia. Second, he could divert the forces of the peripheral regions, resistant to the power of Baghdad, towards the traditional Christian foe: as always, and most prominently in the early phase of Islam,¹⁰⁵ the process of state integration progressed thanks to the revenues obtained from war spoils. This perhaps explains the presence of so many Muslims from all over the empire in Thomas' army (see above in section 13.2). That this was a conscious policy of Ma'mūn is made evident by the case of the capture of Crete by Andalusians and other Muslims who had been occupying Alexandria until then and did not recognize Abbasid suzerainty: when the caliph's armies took the city, he sent most of them to Crete (see above in section 13.3). It is also significant that Thomas' rebellion, undoubtedly backed by the caliph, as we have seen, would not have been possible without a simultaneous understanding with the local ruler Naṣr ibn Shabath. Only some kind of agreement between the local rulers of Syria and Ma'mūn himself could have allowed Thomas to proceed against Constantinople.

In a certain sense Ma'mūn "delegated" participation in the military expedition of Thomas to local forces. In fact, it was customary for him to "hire out" such enterprises to private adventurers, discharging the central government of any liability for them. This process has been appropriately described by Hugh Kennedy when referring to the failed campaigns of Ma'mūn against the rebellion of Bābak at Azerbaijan and their causes. The last campaign took place in 828 and as it ended again in failure, there were no more attempts to subdue Bābak until Mu'taṣim's reign. In Kennedy's words:

The defeat and death of Muhammad b. Humayd [in 828 by Bābak] meant the end of any attempt by Ma'mūn's government to subdue Bābak, and the area seems to have relapsed into anarchy until Mu'taṣim began to take determined measures. But the whole affair is of interest for a number of reasons. It shows once again how limited Islamic penetration was in some areas, particularly mountain areas nominally included in the caliphate, and how these areas could retain their autonomy long after the "conquest". It also shows the military weakness of Ma'mūn's government, and the failure to raise a reliable standing army, like the

¹⁰⁴ Hibri (1999) 126–32 for the political strategies of Ma'mūn since he came to power.

¹⁰⁵ See Robinson (2011b) 199–201 and, more generally, Donner (1981). For the partisans of war against Byzantium as a separate party at the Abbasid court that opposed the interests of the "traders", see Chapter 18.1.

Khurasaniya and *abna*¹⁰⁶ of previous generations. To get round this problem, Ma'mūn began to adopt the expedient of making bargains with military leaders. Both Zurayq and Muhammad ibn Humayd raised their own armies at their own expense to fight Babak. They were very different men – Zurayq was a rogue and a fraud while Muhammad was a conscientious and determined soldier, related to the great Qahtaba family – but they had a common objective. They both hoped to raise and lead armies to take over this potentially very valuable province. Here, they could have established themselves and their followers as rich, almost independent princes. These “private enterprise” military expeditions were a far cry from the organised campaigns of early Abbasid times, and they boded ill for the future of the caliphate. The most important change was not so much in recruitment of leadership ... but in the matter of payment. Early Abbasid armies were paid by the administration from revenue raised by taxation; in the Azerbaijan campaigns, by contrast, the leaders were entrusted with a province to exploit as they wished. The government had lost direct control over taxation and salaries and with it a large measure of its authority.¹⁰⁷

Be this as it may, it was after the end of the civil war in the caliphate in 819 that Ma'mūn slowly started the process of regaining control of some territories. It is perhaps not mere chance that the first person to fall was Naṣr ibn Shabath, defeated by 'Abdallāh ibn Ṭāhir in 824 and brought to Baghdad, in the presence of Ma'mūn in May 825.¹⁰⁸ Immediately afterwards, Egypt submitted once more to Ma'mūn. The caliph, who had first appointed both of the rebels governors to the areas they controlled, as he could not depose them, finally sent an army under the command of 'Abdallāh ibn Ṭāhir, who defeated them in 826 and put the land under Abbasid rule.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, the region remained turbulent and the Copts rebelled against the caliph in the delta region, being defeated in 832.¹¹⁰ It was only Mu'tasim, the brother of Ma'mūn and heir of the caliphate, who finally succeeded in defeating them in 837.

In 827 the invasion of Sicily by the Aghlabids took place, an event that is usually connected with the rebellion of the tourmarches Euphemios against the Byzantine governor and thus interpreted in local terms by modern historians.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, the coincidence with other events we are considering here strikes the attentive scholar. In a sense, Thomas' position is very similar to that of the

¹⁰⁶ Kennedy (1981) 104: “The term is short of *abna'al-dawla* or ‘sons of the state’ and it seems to be used by the new generations of Khurasanis, whose fathers had settled in Baghdad after the revolution and who now regarded the city as their home.” They were the main supporters of Amīn and the Baghdadis against Ma'mūn until 819.

¹⁰⁷ Kennedy (1981) 173–4.

¹⁰⁸ Ṭabarī III.1067–74, trans. Bosworth (1987) 138–46.

¹⁰⁹ Ṭabarī III.1086–92, trans. Bosworth (1987) 159–66.

¹¹⁰ Ibn Mufarrij, *History of the patriarchs*, 486–502.

¹¹¹ For a short summary of the events see Treadgold (1988) 249–55.

contemporary rebel Euphemios, insofar as both gained the support of local Arab rulers, who were only in theory subjects of the Abbasids. Besides, both Thomas and Euphemios proclaimed themselves emperors and their troops fought against the Byzantines along with Arab troops. Is this just a coincidence?

After his arrival in Baghdad in 819, Ma'mūn seems to have laid the foundation for a slow process of recovery of the caliphal authority in the west, highly necessary after so many years of the caliph's absence in the distant east. The end of the process may be signalled in 828–829 by the appointment of his brother Mu'taṣim as governor of Syria and Egypt and of his son 'Abbās as governor of Jazīra, the frontier regions (thughūr) and the defensive fortress ('awāṣim). A direct offensive against Byzantium would inevitably follow. We will deal with this in the next chapter.

Chapter 14

Campaigning in Cilicia and Cappadocia in 830–833

14.1 Ma'mūn's invasion of Cappadocia in 830

Ma'mūn invaded Byzantine territory in the summer of 830, formally breaking a peace agreement between the caliphate and the empire that, at least theoretically, had been in force since the reign of his father Hārūn al-Rashīd.¹ In fact, as we saw in Chapter 13, the involvement of the caliph in the so-called civil war had meant that hostilities between the two main powers in the region actually began in 819. Nonetheless, the year 830 marked the first time in 20 years that the Muslim caliph personally led a summer expedition against the Byzantines.

The campaign was ambitious. Two armies entered the empire by two different routes. The first contingent moved into south Cappadocia from Tarsos through the Cilician Gates and was led personally by the caliph. Ṭabarī is our main source for this.² Apparently Ma'mūn took the northern route on entering Byzantine territory, bypassed Tyana, which is not mentioned by the Arab historian, and first seized the fortress of Mājida, to which most of the population of Tyana had probably moved permanently by then (see Map 2). Koron (Qurra) was the next stronghold taken by the Muslim army. This was at the time the military headquarters of Cappadocia and probably the administrative capital of the district,³ which explains why it became the final target of Ma'mūn's expedition, for the caliph did not advance further into Byzantine territory after taking it. Important cities like Tyana or Kaisareia had lost their economic importance since they were easily reached places frequently raided by the Arabs, so that the administrative centres moved away from them to well-fortified positions like Koron whereas fortress settlements like Mājida were numerous and sheltered the urban population.⁴

From Koron (or Mājida) Ma'mūn dispatched Ashinās to the north(east) to take the fortress of Sundus (modern Soganli), and 'Ujayf and Ja'far al-Khayyāṭ to the

¹ He had set out from Baghdad in March 830, if we give credence to Ṭabarī III.1102, trans. Bosworth (1987) 184. This undoubtedly means that the preparations for a campaign into Byzantine territory took much time, for the caliph probably assembled the troops during his march and prepared the strategy for the offensive in Syria.

² Ṭabarī III.1103, trans. Bosworth (1987) 185–6.

³ Cappadocia was already a theme by the time, as recently argued by Métivier (2008) 443–8.

⁴ Haldon and Kennedy (1980) 86–98.

northwest to take the fortress of Sinān. After both detachments had accomplished their mission Ma'mūn retired again to the south.

The route followed by the second army, led by 'Abbās, Ma'mūn's son, is not so well detailed in the sources. Ṭabarī says that 'Abbās accompanied his father westwards just until they reached Mopsuestia (Maṣṣīṣa). Then he departed for Melitene. Ṭabarī says nothing of the movements 'Abbās made after reaching this point, but it is probable that he entered the Byzantine frontier crossing the Antitaurus range through the passes of Adata or Melitene.⁵ Manuel the Armenian accompanied the army of 'Abbās on this occasion.⁶ After they both plundered some Byzantine fortresses whose names are not given by the sources, Manuel betrayed 'Abbās and fled to the Byzantines.⁷ The exact point of his flight is open to debate. Ya'qūbī says that the caliph destroyed the city of Ankyra and "Manuel the patrician fled from there".⁸ This information is problematic. To begin with, the capture of a major city like Ankyra is unrecorded by the rest of the sources, which on the contrary detail a number of minor strongholds and fortresses in Cappadocia taken by the Arab forces. One would expect a greater emphasis on the taking of Ankyra by the Arab sources if this had taken place, for the other places named were less important. Accordingly, one suspects that the reference to Ankyra in Ya'qūbī is mistaken, either an anticipation of the capture of the city in 838 or as a result of confusion with a city of similar name, less known to the historian. If we consider the second option, then Koron/Qurra would be the most likely candidate.⁹ This fits in well with information preserved in Genesios recording that Manuel's flight took place "in the fortress that is called Gerōn" (πρὸς τὸ πολίχτιον ὃ Γέρων ἐκέκλητο).¹⁰ Warren Treadgold has suggested that the Gerōn of Genesios was the Koron/Qurra mentioned in Ṭabarī.¹¹ However, were this identification correct, then 'Abbās would have passed by the fortress of Koron before it was taken by the caliph's army, which does not make much sense, or even after, which leaves unexplained why 'Abbās should have marched deep into this area of Cappadocia after his father the caliph had already campaigned there. Moreover, we do not even

⁵ He could even have reached Charsianon, which Ibn Qutayba mentions among the fortresses taken by Ma'mūn in 830. See the passage in Vasiliev (1935) 267 and below in section 14.2 for the problems concerning a campaign against Charsianon.

⁶ Th. Cont. III.26 (119.23–120.19), Gen. III.17 (51.33–43) and Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 19–21 (222.132–223.152). See also Chapter 5.3–5 for the exile of Manuel among the Arabs.

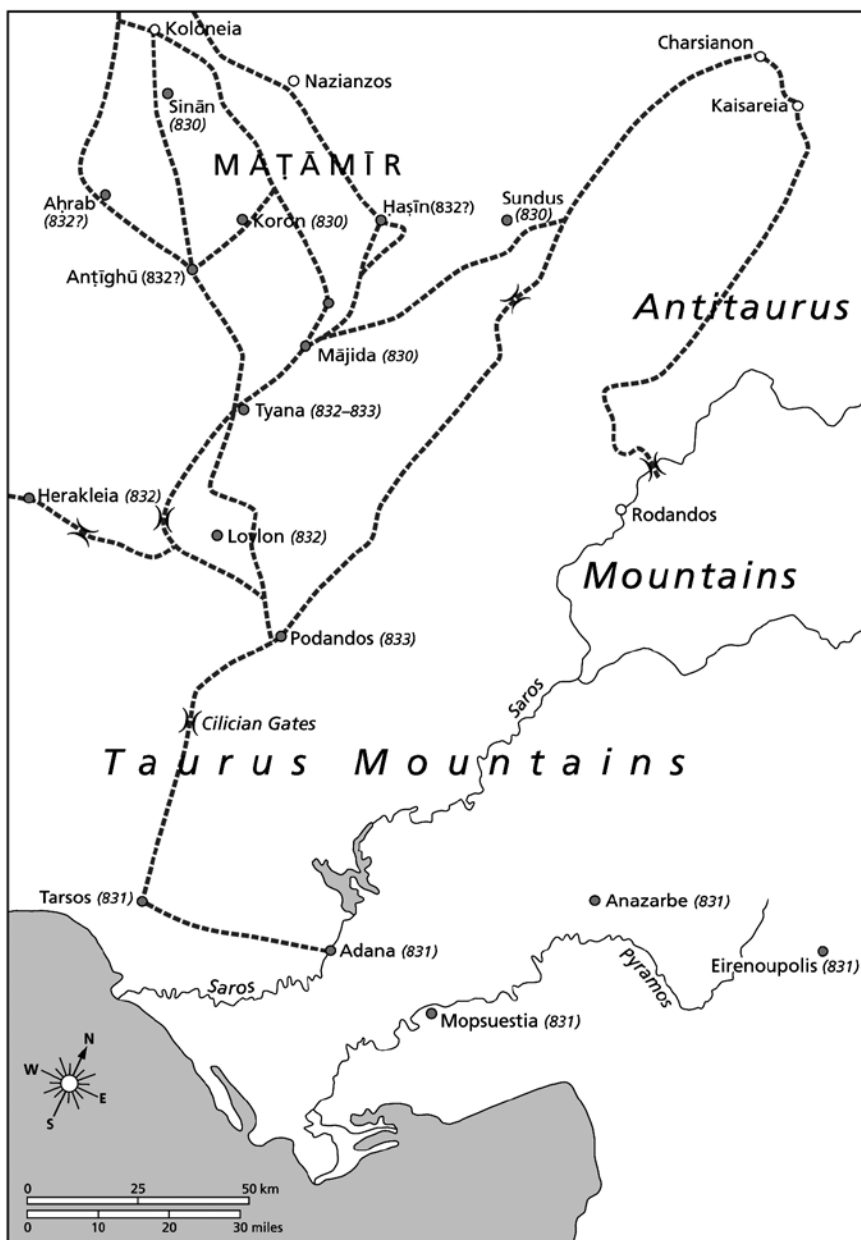
⁷ Ṭabarī III.1103, trans. Bosworth (1987) 186 only mentions that Manuel was with 'Abbās as both met Ma'mūn in the city of Ra's al 'Ayn when the caliph was on his way to Cilicia. However, Ibn Ṭayfūr 264, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 392 has provided us with a more detailed account where it is expressly said that Manuel accompanied 'Abbās in his raids into Byzantine territory and finally betrayed him and passed onto the empire.

⁸ Ya'qūbī vol. 2, 567, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 272.

⁹ Treadgold (1988) 433, note 377.

¹⁰ Gen. III.17 (51.36–37).

¹¹ Treadgold (1988) 433, note 378.



Map 2 Routes of the campaigns of 830, 831, 832 and 833 with the names of the places involved

know whether ‘Abbās really entered Byzantine territory in 830 or campaigned in the area north of Melitene.¹² That he entered into Cappadocia is to be deduced from the indication of Ibn Ṭayfūr that ‘Abbās left Byzantine territory through the pass of Adata.¹³ This points to some kind of problem forcing ‘Abbās to come back to the caliphate.

It is likely that Manuel’s desertion played some role in the further development of the campaign, although we are not able to determine the movements of the Arab army led by the son of the caliph with any greater precision. The silence of the Arab sources about the failure of the expedition of ‘Abbās in 830 has also rendered it difficult to assess its impact on the contingent led by Ma’mūn himself and then moving to south Cappadocia. It could be that the caliph was even forced to put an end prematurely to his campaign due to Manuel’s flight to the Byzantines.

14.2 Theophilos’ First Triumph and his Campaign in Cilicia in 831

The dating of the first triumphal campaign of Theophilos in the east is connected with some chronological problems that are again difficult to disentangle due to the scarce and confused accounts at our disposal. We know the campaign mainly through the so-called *Appendix ad librum primum* of the *Book of Ceremonies*, edited by John Haldon as a separate text.¹⁴ We find there an accurate protocol of the triumphal entry and subsequent festivities Theophilos held in Constantinople when he returned from a victorious campaign against the Cilician Arabs. The title of the protocol runs as follows in Haldon’s translation:

Ἡ ἀπὸ τοῦ φροσσάτου ἐπάνοδος Θεοφίλου βασιλέως, ὅτε ἐνίκησεν κατὰ κράτος τοὺς ἀπὸ Κιλικίας στρατοπεδεύσαντας κατ’ αὐτοῦ Ταρσίτας, Μομψουεστίτας, Ἀδανίτας, Εἰρηνοπολίτας, Ἀναζαρβήτας καὶ λοιποὺς, χιλιάδας κ’. Ἐπανεληθόντος τοίνυν Θεοφίλου τοῦ βασιλέως ἀπὸ τοῦ πολέμου τῶν ἀπὸ Κιλικίας κατ’ αὐτοῦ στρατοπεδευσάντων Ἀγαρηνῶν, ἐγένετο ἡ πρὸς τὴν βασιλεύουσαν πόλιν εἴσοδος αὐτοῦ τοιαύτη.

The return of the emperor Theophilos from campaign, when he was completely victorious over those who made war against him from Tarsos, and Mopsuestia and Adana and Eirenoupolis and Anazarba and others, numbering 20,000. When the emperor Theophilos returned from the war against the Cilician Saracens who campaigned against him, his entry into the imperial City was as follows.¹⁵

¹² Treadgold (1988) 273 suggests that the caliph’s son fought against the Khurramites in 830 with the assistance of Manuel and his troops, but this is not warranted by the sources.

¹³ Ibn Ṭayfūr 264, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 392 and Keller (1908) vol. 2, 120.

¹⁴ Haldon (1990) 146–50. For the ceremonial of triumphs among the Amorians see McCormick (1987) 144–52.

¹⁵ Constantine VII, *Three treatises* 146.808–814.

We are thus informed that the emperor fought Muslim troops from Tarsos, Mopsuestia, Adana, Eirenoupolis and Anazarba,¹⁶ vanquished them and took many prisoners. All the cities named here lie in Cilicia, south of the Taurus range (see Map 2), from the westward Tarsos to the eastward Eirenoupolis, already positioned in the mountains preventing access to the Cilician plain from the east. But when could Theophilos' campaign in Cilicia have taken place?

Ibn Ṭayfūr, Ṭabarī and the *Book of the Sources* come to our aid since all three date the raid of Theophilos against the Cilician troops to HA 216 (18 February 831 to 6 February 832). The Arabic sources provide us thus with the only clue for dating the triumph of Theophilos described in the Byzantine protocol, which does not in fact provide any chronological reference. Only the mention of a kaisar riding next to Theophilos offers a possible hint,¹⁷ but we are again on shaky ground, as we do not know when Alexios Mousele, son-in-law of the emperor and the only known kaisar in Theophilos' reign, was granted this title. Moreover, as we argued in Chapter 7.2, Alexios could not have been kaisar at the beginning of Theophilos' reign.¹⁸ We considered in Chapter 11.3 the possibility that the Persian Theophobos was in fact the kaisar of this triumph, based to a great extent on the conclusions about the dating we will now reach here.

The dating of the Arab sources can be accepted without further questioning. It confirms that the young emperor Theophilos was able to organize in some months a military campaign to retaliate for the Muslim invasion of 830. But where did the campaign of Theophilos actually take place? Did the emperor invade Cilicia, as the protocol seems to imply?

Logic would suggest that we locate the fighting in Cilicia itself, but the text is not explicit concerning the place. The question is complicated by a suggestion made by Alexander Vasiliev and later modified by Warren Treadgold, who identified the victory of 831 with a campaign fought by Theophilos against the Muslims at Charsianon, in the Armeniakoi theme, mentioned only by the Continuator.¹⁹ The passage reads as follows:

Τῷ δ' ἐπιόντι ἐνιαυτῷ ἔξεισι πάλιν μετὰ δυνάμεως ὁ Θεόφιλος, καὶ κατὰ τὸ Χαρσιανὸν πολλὰ ἐκ τῆς προτέρας νίκης τῶν Ἰσμηλιτῶν ἀπαυθαδιαζομένων καὶ ἀλαζονευομένων, τούτοις συμπλακεῖς πολλοὺς τε χειροῦται τούτων, καὶ λείαν λαμβάνει ὡς τῶν πέντε καὶ εἴκοσι ἄχρι χιλιάδων, καὶ μετὰ νίκης λαμπρᾶς πρὸς τὴν βασιλεύουσαν ἐπανάγεται.

¹⁶ For Cilicia and its cities during the Byzantine period see Hild and Hellenkemper (1990).

¹⁷ Constantine VII, *Three treatises* 148.840–44.

¹⁸ More arguments for this supposition in Signes Codoñer (1995) 451–3, where I refute Treadgold (1988) 331–2, who argued that the protocol of the triumph of 831 mistakenly included a reference to a kaisar based on a parallel protocol of 837.

¹⁹ Vasiliev (1935) vol. 1, 104–5 and Treadgold (1988) 275 and particularly 434, note 380.

The following year Theophilos went out again with a force, and engaging at Charsianon the Ismaelites, who had grown very bold and boastful on account of their earlier victory, he worsted many of them and took booty amounting to five-and-twenty thousand, and with splendid victory he returned to the imperial city.²⁰

This passage introduces a lengthy account of the fight in the hippodrome at Constantinople between one of the Muslim prisoners of war and Theodore Krateros, one of the future martyrs of Amorion, who obviously defeated his rival.²¹ A hagiographic source must be presupposed.

For Vasiliev, since the protocol of the triumph refers to a campaign in Cilicia, the reference to Charsianon must be to a secondary expedition of another detachment of Theophilos' army during the same campaign of 831. Treadgold for his part thought that the emperor could have completely vanquished an army of Cilician Muslims at Charsianon (in the Armeniakoi theme), that is, that the Arabs came *from* Cilicia but the fight actually took place on Byzantine territory.

The identification of the Cilicia and Charsianon campaigns is further favoured by the fact that the emperor is said to have taken many prisoners in both of them: 20,000 in the protocol and 25,000 in the Continuator. Both campaigns also ended with a triumph in Constantinople. However, there are some problems with the identification of the campaign of 831 with the expedition in Charsianon.²²

First of all, while we could understand the text to indicate that the encounter happened "at Charsianon" (by linking *κατὰ τὸ Χαρσιανὸν* with *συμπλακείς*), it is also possible to understand the text of the Continuator in the sense that "since the Ismaelites had grown very bold and boastful against Charsianon on account of their earlier victory" (by linking *κατὰ τὸ Χαρσιανὸν* with *ἀπαυθαδιαζομένων* and *ἀλαζονευομένων*),²³ the emperor engaged in combat with them. If we accept this second possibility, the text could indeed refer to a previous attack of the Muslims, probably coming from the area of Melitene, against the border region around Charsianon. A retaliatory campaign of Theophilos against these attacks could then be identified with the campaign of 837, where the emperor plundered Sozopetra and defeated the Melitenians in the battlefield, forcing them to pay tribute to Byzantium. However, Ibn Qutayba, an Arab historian of the second half of the ninth century, mentions that Ma'mūn took Charsianon in 830. Could the text of the

²⁰ Th. Cont. III.23 (114.17–22).

²¹ For a commentary on this episode see Chapter 8.2.

²² For arguments against Treadgold's identification see Signes Codoñer (1995) 501–2.

²³ The punctuation in the manuscript, preserved by the editors, appears to favour this last rendering of the text, for there is no break or pause before *πολλά*. The genitive absolute *τῶν Ἰσμηλιτῶν ἀπαυθαδιαζομένων καὶ ἀλαζονευομένων* seems also to demand some kind of spatial specification. Moreover, the dative *τούτοις*, which refers to *τῶν Ἰσμηλιτῶν* and is governed by the participle *συμπλακείς*, introduces a clear break with the previous sentence. However, the possibility that the military encounter happened at Charsianon must not be completely discarded, for the author hastily summarizes his source.

Continuator somehow refer to the previous victory as being against Charsianon?²⁴ If we interpret the passage in this way, then the retaliatory campaign of Theophilos could have taken place in 831, but without having Charsianon as a target. In any case, the fact remains that the Continuator indicates that the Ismaelites who fought Theophilos at Charsianon had grown very bold and boastful “on account of their earlier victory” (ἐκ τῆς προτέρας νίκης), so that a Muslim victory must precede the triumph unless we consider that the Continuator added this detail just to link his account with the previous narrative (see below).

It seems even more problematic to place on Byzantine territory what seems to have been a brilliant victory of Theophilos against the Muslims, so brilliant that it was recorded and even taken as a model as late as in the reign of Constantine VII. Could a defeat of invaders or raiders on Byzantine soil at Charsianon have been sufficient occasion for a triumph? Would we not rather have expected a plundering of foreign cities that provided the spoils to be shown on the streets of the capital?²⁵ Although the wording of the Greek text is not especially clear, I would argue that Treadgold pushes his argument too far when he suggests that nowhere in the text is it said that the war was fought in Cilicia. Strictly speaking he could be right, as the text seems to say that Theophilos defeated Arabs *coming from Cilicia*. However, it seems strange that the text mentioned only the provenance of the troops without reference to the combat zone which lay further away, as Treadgold supposes to have been the case. Moreover, an attack of the Cilician Muslims against Byzantium would most probably have set off from the Cilician Gates, as did the inroads of Ma'mūn in 830 and again in 832, as we will see further in this chapter. And, as Sophie Métivier puts it in a recent study, Charsianon provided no help for anyone attempting to occupy the south of Cappadocia, except for its function of rear defence.²⁶ Accordingly, Treadgold makes the Cilicians cross the frontier by the pass of Adata, in Syria and further east, a route that led directly to Charsianon and Sebasteia. However, in this case one would have expected the presence of Syrian troops (Melitenians) in the Muslim army.²⁷

The high numbers of prisoners given in both accounts, 20,000 in the protocol and 25,000 in the “Charsianon” campaign, are worth considering in this connection. If these numbers refer to soldiers captured during the war, they are indeed too high

²⁴ See the translation of the passage of Ibn Qutayba in Vasiliev (1935) 267.

²⁵ Although the protocol focuses on the movements of the emperor, it mentions also the spoils that were paraded on this occasion along with the prisoners: τὸς δεσμίους καὶ τὰ λάφυρα ἐθριάμβευσαν, Haldon (1990) 150, lines 877–8.

²⁶ Métivier (2008) 449–50. For the location of Charsianon see Beldiceanu-Steinherr (1981) and Hild and Restle (1981) 163–5.

²⁷ Strictly speaking the text does not say that Theophilos defeated the invaders “when they were campaigning (στρατοπεδεύοντα) against him”, but that he defeated the Muslim Cilicians “who had campaigned (στρατοπεδεύσαντα) against him”, meaning perhaps that they had *previously* attacked or even *used to* attack the Byzantine border: Theophilos would have punished them with a retaliatory expedition deep into Cilicia.

considering that this was well above the average of the armies of the period, which only exceptionally reached these dimensions.²⁸ But they perhaps also included civilians taken as booty when plundering the enemy's territory and countryside. Michael the Syrian notes that Theophilos sent to the empire in 837 all the captives taken in Sozopetra, Armenia and the region of Melitene. His account makes it clear that the civilian population was enslaved.²⁹ Ṭabarī mentions that at Sozopetra alone over a thousand women were enslaved.³⁰ We are thus obliged to suppose that the imperial armies ravaged Arab territory in both cases. This would mean not only that Theophilos entered Cilicia, but also that a campaign "in Charsianon" does not make sense either, provided of course that we accept that the emperor returned with 25,000 prisoners.

Finally, the Arab sources seem to imply that the emperor took at least some of the Cilician cities. Ibn Ṭayfūr and Ṭabarī speak of a "slaughter of people of Tarsos and Mopsuestia (Maṣṣīṣa)",³¹ but the anonymous *Book of the Sources* stresses also that the emperor entered Cilician territory.³² Certainly, it seems unlikely that Theophilos took all the Cilician cities named in the protocol, for they were important strongholds, which constituted the vanguard of the defences of the caliphate against Byzantium, the so-called "frontier regions" or *thughūr* organized by Hārūn al-Rashīd.³³ In fact, Ṭabarī tells us that in HA 213 (22 March 828 to 10 March 829) Ma'mūn "appointed his son 'Abbās ibn al-Ma'mūn as governor over the Jazīra, the frontier regions (*thughūr*) and the defensive fortresses ('awāṣim)".³⁴ Probably Ma'mūn's first campaign of 830 was the natural consequence of the appointment of his son as governor of the frontier districts and made manifest his will of reassuming campaigns in the west against Byzantium. He must therefore have paid some attention to the fortification of the Cilician cities in the years 828–830. Some of the cities named in the Byzantine protocol, especially Eirenoupolis, lay in the mountains of eastern Cilicia, a region where the emperor would probably not have ventured.

Nevertheless, as early as during the reign of Nikephoros I, the Byzantines had devastated the areas of Mopsuestia and Anazarba and even taken captives at Tarsos.³⁵ And Tarsos, known in the tenth century for its imposing double-walls,

²⁸ See Haldon (1999) 101–3 and (2006) 132–4. Obviously the size of the armies was directly related to the logistics of the military expeditions and the numbers of the cavalry contingents, on which again Haldon (1999) 163–74 and (2006).

²⁹ Michel the Syrian 531–3, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 89.

³⁰ Ṭabarī III.1234, trans. Bosworth (1991) 93.

³¹ Ṭabarī III.1104, trans. Bosworth (1987) 187; Ibn Ṭayfūr I.264, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 392. Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Miskawayh are dependent on Ṭabarī.

³² Vasiliev (1935) 104, note 1, but this important point is not rendered conveniently in the translation at p. 370.

³³ Sivers (1982) 76–7.

³⁴ Ṭabarī III.1100, trans. Bosworth (1987) 178.

³⁵ Mich. Syr. 488–9, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 16, dating the campaign to 1115 of the Seleucian era = AD 804. This expedition motivated a retaliatory campaign of Hārūn al-Rashīd, who advanced as far as Herakleia.

had changed sides in the years before and had probably been in Byzantine hands for many years.³⁶ The Muslim population of Cilicia remained a minority among the Christians, who could have supported the Byzantine raids.³⁷ It is therefore not altogether unlikely that the Byzantine emperor raided Cilicia after the first campaign of Ma'mūn and took some Muslim garrisons by surprise.

A last point to be considered in establishing a date for the Charsianon campaign is the fact that its account is introduced by the Continuator with the indication that the emperor took the field “in the year following” (τῷ δ' ἐπιόντι ἐνιαυτῷ) another campaign, an account of which immediately precedes our text. In this other case Theophilos fought a fierce battle against Muslim troops commanded by two otherwise unknown generals, named Ibrahim (Ἰβραήμ) and Abuzachar (Ἀβουζάχαρ). Both the Persian leader Theophobos and the domestikos Manuel fought at the side of the emperor, we are told, but whereas Manuel took flight before the troops of Abuzachar, Theophobos was able to rescue the emperor, who remained surrounded by the enemies on the top of a hill.³⁸ This account has always been rightly identified with the battle of Anzes of 838, where Theophilos, being persecuted by the enemy, took refuge on a hill with a few of his men and was almost captured by the Arabs who surrounded him, although he finally succeeded in opening a breach in their lines and escaping (see Chapter 8.2).³⁹ This means that a campaign following that of 838 should accordingly be dated at the earliest to 839. However, since no triumphs of Theophilos took place after the defeat of Amorion in 838, we must conclude that the Continuator mistakenly placed the account of the victorious campaign of Theophilos “in the year following” this previous campaign of 838. He probably made some deduction about the relative chronology of the events when trying to put in order his undated sources. This is by no means an uncommon procedure of this author, who systematically tried to arrange chronologically the undated accounts of his sources.⁴⁰ In this case, he did not notice that the account of the battle against Ibrahim and Abuzachar was a double of the battle of Anzes he reported later on in his work. He accordingly put it at the beginning of Theophilos' reign, for he perhaps did not have any other sources at his disposal about the first campaign of Ma'mūn. We must take into account the fact that most of the sources in which Theophobos and Manuel are protagonists (this is the case for the campaign against Ibrahim and Abuzachar) were taken from biographic or hagiographic sources without a precise dating.

We cannot therefore conclude anything positive about the victorious “Charsianon” campaign of Theophilos. Although I would tend to place it later in his reign and even identify it with the triumph of 837, one should not exclude the possibility of identifying it with the victory of 831, as Vasiliev and Treadgold argued. Anyway, the

³⁶ Bosworth (1992) 271–4.

³⁷ Sivers (1982) 75–6.

³⁸ Th. Cont. III.22 (112.22–114.16).

³⁹ See also Signes Codoñer (2013a).

⁴⁰ Signes Codoñer (1995) 669.

fact that it is presented by the Continuator as the second campaign of Theophilos' reign is no valid argument, since the campaign previously mentioned is probably dated to 838. That the Continuator must have had some information about Theophilos' major triumph in 831 is also speculative, particularly considering that this episode is absent from *Genesios*. For a dating of 831 we should interpret the text in the sense that the fight took place in or around "Charsianon", for this could have been the scenario only in Theophilos' early campaigns against Ma'mūn: later campaigns against Mu'taṣim between 834 and 837 were fought outside the Byzantine borders. Only if we suppose that in the Continuator's source (without any doubt a hagiographic text: Theodore Krateros is the protagonist of the history) some kind of confusion took place between Charsianon (Χαρσιανόν) and the region of Chorzane (Χορζάνε) or Chorzianene (Χορζιανηνή), could a plausible explanation be found, for the imperial troops fought in the region of the Khordzean/Khortzianē in 837, although Theophilos defeated the Melitenian troops to the west of Arsamosata, far away to the south (Chapter 16). But this is mere conjecture without any further support.

Whatever the solution, the fact remains that Theophilos won a major victory in 831. Ma'mūn, who had perhaps underestimated the ability of the new emperor, felt obliged to mount a second campaign against Byzantium. This campaign is usually dated to the same year, 831. This dating is again not unproblematic. The evidence must be assessed in some detail.

14.3 The Dating of Ma'mūn's Second Campaign in Cappadocia

The three Arab historians who date the campaign of Theophilos against the Cilicians to HA 216 link it to a retaliatory expedition supposedly directed by the caliph Ma'mūn the same year against several fortresses of south Cappadocia. This campaign was apparently well organized, for Ma'mūn was accompanied by his son 'Abbās and his brother and successor Abū Ishāq (the future caliph Mu'taṣim), who commanded their own troops and followed different routes while plundering Cappadocia. Here is Ṭabarī's account in the English translation by Bosworth:

Ma'mūn's return to the land of the Byzantines. There are varying reports about this. It is said, the reason for it was that Ma'mūn received reports about the king of Byzantium's slaughter of people of Tarsos and Maṣṣīṣah – according to what has been mentioned, amounting to sixteen hundred in all. When he got this news, he set off on an expedition till he entered the land of the Byzantines on Monday, the nineteenth of Jumādā I of this year, and he remained there till the middle of Sha'bān. But it is also said that the reason for it was that Theophilos son of Michael wrote to Ma'mūn and put his own name first in his letter. When the letter reached Ma'mūn, he did not read it, and set off for the land of the Byzantines. The envoys of Theophilos, son of Michael, met him at Adana, and Theophilos sent along to Ma'mūn five hundred Muslim captives.

When Ma'mūn entered the Byzantine lands, he halted before Anṭiḡhū and besieged it, and its garrison marched out to him after securing peace terms (without fighting). Ma'mūn then proceeded to Heraklia, and its garrison marched out to him after securing peace terms. He sent off his brother Abū Ishāq, who captured thirty fortresses and subterranean strongholds and storehouses [*Maṭāmīr*] and he sent off from Ṭuwānah Yaḥyā ibn Akhtam, who raided, killed, burned, seized and enslaved captives, and he returned to the main body of the army. Ma'mūn next set off towards Kaysūm, and remained there for two or three days and then turned back to Damascus.⁴¹

The accounts of Ibn Ṭayfūr and of the *Book of the Sources* are much more succinct, although the latter has some important discrepancies concerning Ma'mūn's route in Byzantine Cappadocia and also includes a very significant addition, for it says that the army of 'Abbās met the Byzantine troops commanded by the emperor Theophilos and defeated them, taking considerable booty:

This year al 'Abbās, son of Ma'mūn, led an expedition against the Greek emperor. They had a clash and God made the tyrant flee. 'Abbās defeated his army and took a big booty.⁴²

This point is also mentioned by Ya'qūbī, who reduces his account of the campaign of HA 216 to the pillaging of the Maṭāmīr by Ma'mūn and the defeat of Theophilos by his son 'Abbās.⁴³

All told, one gets the impression that something does not fit with the sequence of events. Does it really make sense that Theophilos, after having defeated the Muslims in Cilicia in the spring of 831, hurried to the capital in order to celebrate a triumph, knowing that the caliph could come after him, and invade Byzantine territory? What was the point for the emperor in making such a hasty triumph in Constantinople, especially considering that he was apparently forced to march immediately against the caliph again and even to risk, as appears to have happened, a defeat at the hands of his son 'Abbās?

Such a development of events appears unlikely. Indeed, if Theophilos ended his campaign in Cilicia in late spring, though that would not allow him sufficient time to reach all the major Cilician cities that we are told were involved in the raid, the caliph might have time enough to assemble his troops after the news of the Cilician raid of Theophilos reached him in Baghdad and to march at all speed against the empire in order to cross the frontier, say, about the middle of the summer. But what about Theophilos? When he became acquainted with the arrival of the caliph at the frontier he had pillaged about two months earlier, the summer would have been approaching its end. In theory he could have set off again from

⁴¹ Ṭabarī III.1104, trans. Bosworth (1987) 187–8. See also Vasiliev (1935) 288–9.

⁴² Vasiliev (1935) 371.

⁴³ Vasiliev (1935) 272.

Constantinople at this time and have reached the frontier at the beginning of autumn, in order to meet the retiring forces of the caliph in a last battle. In fact, Ibn Ṭayfūr and Ṭabarī say that the caliph “remained there (in Byzantine lands) till the middle of Sha’ban”. that is to say, until the end of September and the beginning of October. However, campaigning over such large distances needs time to prepare, to say nothing of money, logistics and strategy. Such rapid moves as are implied in the above sketch appear highly suspect. It is moreover absolutely unheard of for a Byzantine emperor to campaign twice the same year in the same place – and to celebrate a triumph in between!⁴⁴

It is therefore advisable to review the evidence provided by the Arab sources, for another sequence of events may be arguable. The first point we should notice is that the victorious campaign of Theophilos against the Cilicians is not dated in the Arab sources, but only mentioned as the direct cause of Ma’mūn’s second campaign against the Byzantines, the first one dating to HA 215. Nowhere in the Arab sources is it expressly said that this second campaign of Ma’mūn took place in the same year as the one led by Theophilos. As we have already seen, it would seem advisable to place the campaign of Theophilos in the year before the retaliatory expedition of Ma’mūn against Cappadocia in order to create a more appropriate timeframe.

It is however impossible to date the first campaign of Theophilos to the year 830, since in this year, which corresponds approximately to HA 215 (28 February 830 to 17 February 831), Ma’mūn directed his first expedition against Byzantium, as we have seen. Would it be possible to date the second campaign of Ma’mūn in south Cappadocia against Tyana, Herakleia and the Maṭāmīr to HA 217 (7 February 832 to 26 January 833)? There is some evidence that suggests this could be the right option.

First of all we must take into account that the second campaign of Ma’mūn against Byzantium is dated to HA 216 because all Arab historians who mention it included the information they found in their sources about this campaign under this year. All three historians we are considering here, namely Ibn Ṭayfūr, Ṭabarī and the *Book of the Sources*, worked in the cut-and-paste method characteristic of the annalists or chronographers,⁴⁵ that is to say, selected their material from the available sources and itemized it under the corresponding year. The account of a year in these three historians is mostly the sequence of a series of unrelated events. Accordingly, it is perfectly possible that a single comment taken from a source could occasionally be inserted in the wrong year, especially when the information provided by the source was misleading, undated⁴⁶ or even included a sequence of

⁴⁴ This sequence of events is nonetheless the one adopted by Vasiliev (1935) and Treadgold (1988) and thereafter constitutes the *communis opinio*.

⁴⁵ See Khalidi (1975) 5–6 for the expression “woodcutter by night” that Mas’ūdī used to describe the historian’s craft.

⁴⁶ Confusion arose when the original dating of the source was not made according to the Hegira, as usually happened with the oldest sources about the origins of Islam: see Noth

events embracing more than one year. On the other hand, we must consider also that not all the Arab chronicles of the time were arranged according to Hegira, for there were also caliphal chronographies organized in regnal dates. The *Book of the Sources* appears to be a hybrid, where annalistic dating is interleaved within regnal chapters.⁴⁷ As regnal years do not fit in with Hegira, this easily triggered a one-year shift in the chronology. To guide our judgment in these cases we must accordingly pay serious attention to the supplementary dating the writer provides for each one of the items listed under a year.

That the dates provided by Ibn Ṭayfūr are not always trustworthy is confirmed by the chronological references provided for the campaign of HA 215 (= AD 830) by Ṭabarī, who relied mainly on him.⁴⁸ Ṭabarī begins his account of the campaign of 830 with a very precise dating. According to him, Ma'mūn set out from Baghdad to raid the Byzantines on Saturday 27 Muḥarram of 215. This corresponds exactly with 26 March 830, which was a Saturday.⁴⁹ The dating is lacking in Ibn Ṭayfūr. However, Ṭabarī immediately adds that “other reports say that he travelled from Shammāsiyya [a town to the north of Baghdad] to Baradān [a town on the Tigris above Sāmarrā] on Thursday, after the noon worship, the 24th of Muḥarram, 215”.⁵⁰ This second dating is not exact, since 23 March 830, which corresponds to 24th of Muḥarram, 215, was actually a Wednesday, not a Thursday. The source of this alternative dating is undoubtedly Ibn Ṭayfūr, who refers to it exactly in the same way as Ṭabarī but with further precision, for he says that Thursday the 24th of Muḥarram 215 was the 24th of (the Hebrew month of) Adār.⁵¹ Moreover, Ibn Ṭayfūr should have referred rather to the month of Veadār or Adār II, for this year (4950) was embolismic in the Hebrew calendar and an extra month must be added. Accordingly, the reference of Ibn Ṭayfūr is mistaken, perhaps because the author did not make the right conversion from the Hebrew to the Islamic calendar. The same problem appears again when Ibn Ṭayfūr mentions that Ma'mūn ordered the Byzantine fortress of Qurra to be destroyed on Sunday the 26th of Jumādā I. This date corresponds to 21 July 830, which was a Thursday.⁵² Ṭabarī repeats the wrong dating taken from Ibn Ṭayfūr.⁵³

Concerning now the dating of the second campaign of Ma'mūn in south Cappadocia, Ṭabarī expressly says that Ma'mūn “entered the land of the

and Conrad (1994) 42–8. In our case, we should establish first whether the information about the campaigns of the caliphs was official, dependent on oral sources or based on a dating different from Hegira (see below for the references to Hebrew months in Ibn Ṭayfūr).

⁴⁷ See Robinson (2003) 46–7 and 74–9.

⁴⁸ For Ibn Ṭayfūr see now Toorawa (2005).

⁴⁹ Ṭabarī III.1102, trans. Bosworth (1987) 184.

⁵⁰ Ṭabarī III.1102, trans. Bosworth (1987) 184.

⁵¹ Ibn Ṭayfūr, 262, trans. Keller (1908) vol. 2, 119 and Vasiliev (1935) 391.

⁵² Ibn Ṭayfūr, 262, trans. Keller (1908) vol. 2, 119 and Vasiliev (1935) 392.

⁵³ Ṭabarī III.1103, trans. Bosworth (1987) 185.

Byzantines on Monday, the 19th of Jumādā I of this year”.⁵⁴ The 19th of Jumādā I of 216 corresponds with the 4 July 831, but this day was actually a Tuesday, not a Monday, as Ṭabarī claims. The date figures also in the text of Ibn Ṭayfūr, where we can read that Ma’mūn “entered the land of the Byzantines on Monday, the 19th of Jumādā I of the year 216”.⁵⁵ Again, the error, if there was one, passed thus to Ṭabarī from him. If we analyse then with some attention the weekdays given by Ibn Ṭayfūr for the days of the month cited in his work, we easily discover that they do not usually fit at all.

It is accordingly significant that Ibn Ṭayfūr dates the ending of Ma’mūn’s campaign in Byzantium for the year 216 “in the middle of Sha’bān, that is, the 24th of Elul”,⁵⁶ thus giving again a Jewish date along with the Muslim one. As we have seen, Ṭabarī suppressed this reference to the Hebrew calendar from his narrative, perhaps rightly, for the month of Sha’bān corresponded to the Hebrew Tishri, not to Elul. But the main point is that the apparently exact chronology of Ibn Ṭayfūr for the weekdays is unreliable for these years, apparently due to an imperfect combined use of two different calendars. Accordingly, it could be that “the 19th of Jumādā I” mentioned in Ibn Ṭayfūr did not necessarily refer to the year 216, under which this piece of narrative was inserted, but to another year.

In particular, the year 217 would be a more likely candidate for the retaliatory campaign of Ma’mūn. Certainly, this year the 19th of Jumādā I fell on a Saturday, not a Monday as Ibn Ṭayfūr states, but this discrepancy, as we have already seen, is not a definitive objection to our supposition considering the frequent slips of this historian regarding weekdays.⁵⁷ More important, the circumstance that Ibn Ṭayfūr expressly dated to HA 216 the second Cappadocian campaign of Ma’mūn is not actually significant, since the mention of the year comes automatically from the inclusion of the report of the campaign under the events taking place that year. There is an unmistakable tendency in the Arab sources to pair related events under the same year despite their diverging chronology, for the narrative unity seems to them more important.⁵⁸ As we will see in Chapter 16, this circumstance

⁵⁴ Ṭabarī III.1104, trans. Bosworth (1987) 187.

⁵⁵ Ibn Ṭayfūr, 264, trans. Keller (1908) vol. 2, 129 and Vasiliev (1935) 392–3.

⁵⁶ Ibn Ṭayfūr, 264, trans. Keller (1908) vol. 2, 120 and Vasiliev (1935) 393.

⁵⁷ It would therefore be daring to suggest any emendation of the text of Ibn Ṭayfūr in this passage, but some possibilities are perhaps available. So, the 19th of Jumādā II of the year 217, which corresponds to 22 July 832, was actually a Monday, although this date seems too late for beginning a military campaign. I think therefore that the error lies in the weekday and is perhaps explained by the fact that the Muslim and Hebrew weeks begin on different days.

⁵⁸ Donner (1998) 141–6 (“Themes and Issues in the Early Islamic Narrative Tradition”) mentions “Boundary themes”, including Islamic campaigns against the Byzantines, as topics which favoured the existence of clusters of accounts which articulated historical narratives. See *ibid.* 280–82 for a short characterization of the historiography of the Abbasid period and its reworking of the sources according to the organizational scheme of the works. See also Robinson (2003) 40–43 (“The significance of ninth-century change”) for the problems

also explains that the Arab sources date to 838 (HA 223 = 3 December 837 to 22 November 838) the campaign of Theophilos against Sozopetra, which was undoubtedly carried out in 837. The Arab chroniclers did so just to make a single narrative out of Theophilos' campaign and the ensuing campaign of Mu'tašim against Amorion of 838. Accordingly, the narrative needs of the chroniclers pushed Theophilos' campaign against Sozopetra forward to HA 223 to connect it with Mu'tašim's campaign in that year, whereas in the case we are considering now it seems that Ma'mūn's campaign in HA 217 has been moved back to HA 216 in order to present it as the immediate military answer to Theophilos' invasion of that year.

One should also observe that the usually detailed Ibn Ṭayfūr recorded no campaign of Ma'mūn for HA 217. However, it is interesting that he and Ṭabarī mention the presence of Ma'mūn in the Cilician town of Adana on the 16th of Jumādā I, which corresponds to 19 June 832 (this time without giving any weekday).⁵⁹ On this day Ma'mūn executed the governor of Jibāl there for his tyrannical conduct. As Adana lies quite near the Cilician Gates, the entrance into Byzantine territory, one wonders what Ma'mūn could be doing here except reassembling his troops before invading the empire. This could have happened only three days later. Perhaps even on the 19th of Jumādā I = 22 June mentioned already?

Also revealing is the lack of any date for the second Cappadocian campaign of Ma'mūn in the account of the *Book of the Sources*, which is closely related to the account given by Ṭabarī.⁶⁰ Curiously enough, the *Book of the Sources* dates to HA 215 (28 February 830 to 17 February 831) Ma'mūn's first campaign against Cappadocia and to HA 217 Ma'mūn's campaign against the Byzantine fortress of Loulon, of which we will speak below. It seems as if the second Cappadocian campaign of Ma'mūn, which is described in the *Book of the Sources* after the first and before the latter, could have taken place only in the meantime and accordingly in HA 216. However, if this was the case, why should the *Book of the Sources* have omitted such an obvious dating? I think the reason was that its source provided no exact dating for this campaign. The writer of the *Book of the Sources* (or his source) inserted the account of the campaign in what he considered the most obvious place, as he did have some accurate information on a campaign of Ma'mūn against Loulon for the next year. But it could be that the supposed campaign against Loulon was just an episode of the second Cappadocian expedition of Ma'mūn, but taken from a different source. There is some evidence for this being the case.

raised by "the amalgamation of disparate and fragmented accounts into the large, synthetic works of the mid-ninth century".

⁵⁹ Ibn Ṭayfūr vol. 1, 267, trans. Keller (1908) vol. 2, 121; see Vasiliev (1935) 393. Ṭabarī III.1107, trans. Bosworth (1987) 192.

⁶⁰ *Book of the Sources* 374, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 370–71.

14.4 The Fortress of Loulon

The Byzantine fortress of Loulon (Λουλλον, Arabic Lu'lu'a) lies 30 km north-northwest of the Cilician Gates and could be considered easily the first target in a possible invasion of Byzantine territory from the Arab-held Cilician lands (Map 2).⁶¹ The fortress was besieged by Ma'mūn in HA 217 = 832 according to the *Book of the Sources* and Ṭabarī, as Ibn Ṭayfūr does not mention any campaign of the caliph under this year. The *Book of the Sources* says that the caliph besieged the fortress “for some time”,⁶² Ṭabarī “for a hundred days” (which seems a simple rounded figure),⁶³ and both that Ma'mūn left the place after appointing 'Ujayf (the *nisba* is given in *The Book of the Sources*: Ibn 'Anbasa) commander of the besiegers. Apparently Ma'mūn returned to Muslim territory, because the *Book of the Sources* says that the caliph left Loulon and set off for a fortress named Salaghūs, which is near Cilician Tarsos and accordingly in Muslim territory.⁶⁴

Nobody has considered strange the possibility that the caliph led in person a campaign against Byzantium only to be stopped by a fortress scarcely a few miles away from the frontier. Moreover, the caliph apparently despaired of taking the fortress of Loulon and returned to Cilicia after some time. It makes more sense if we consider the siege of Loulon as only the first stop of a massive campaign against Byzantium. In fact, to the east of Loulon two main roads led into the heart of Cappadocia. One of them led eastwards to Herakleia (today Ereğli), the other northwards to Tyana. To the north of Tyana lay the fortress of Anṭīghū and the region of the Maṭāmīr. These places are mentioned in Ṭabarī in connection with Ma'mūn's second Cappadocian campaign. As we have seen, Ma'mūn advanced to the north of Tyana in the campaign of HA 215 = 830, even further away from Muslim Cilicia than in the campaign dated to HA 216 = 831. It is therefore difficult to believe that Ma'mūn could have undertaken a third campaign in Cilicia in HA 217 = 832 only to besiege Loulon. If this was the case, it would have been a major failure for the caliph.

A possible explanation is that the Byzantines fortified Loulon after a previous attack of the Muslim troops against Cappadocia. In that case, perhaps more time was needed than just a few wintry months in order to fortify a place that was apparently so difficult to take. On the contrary, every inroad against south Cappadocia setting off from the Cilician Gates could advance as far north as fortresses such as Sinān, Koron or those in the Maṭāmīr region only after having subdued or taken control

⁶¹ Hild and Restle (1981) 223–4.

⁶² *Book of the Sources* 375, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 371.

⁶³ Ṭabarī III.1109, trans. Bosworth (1987) 194.

⁶⁴ Of the stay of Ma'mūn in Salaghūs we have only a brief entry in Ṭabarī III.1111, trans. Bosworth (1987) 197: “In this year Ma'mūn went to Salaghūs.” This sentence is unrelated to the siege of Loulon described by Ṭabarī many lines before.

of the Byzantine garrison of Loulon, which could otherwise endanger the retreat of the caliph's forces into Cilicia after a summer campaign.⁶⁵

Strategy would suggest that Loulon was besieged during a Muslim campaign in south Cappadocia. This could be precisely the reason for the caliph not taking the fortress by himself, but leaving a detachment behind him and proceeding further north into the heart of Byzantine Cappadocia, in order to inflict as much harm as possible to the Byzantines. One might have also expected this siege to have taken place during the first Cappadocian inroad of the caliph, dated without any shadow of doubt to HA 215 = 830. However, as the siege of Loulon is mentioned in the account as HA 217 = 832, two years later, I am inclined to identify it with the second Cappadocian campaign of Ma'mūn, thus providing additional arguments to date this campaign to HA 217.

We should now seek an explanation for Loulon not being mentioned at all during the first Cappadocian campaign of Ma'mūn despite its high strategic significance, as the fortress guarded the roads that led into inner Cappadocia. The reason could be that Loulon was only fortified in the year 831, in connection with the victorious campaign of Theophilos against Cilicia we mentioned above. It is reasonable to suppose that the Byzantine emperor marched against Muslim Cilicia in 831 in order to retaliate for the Muslim inroad against Cappadocia of the previous year, but also to prevent future attacks of such a kind. Theophilos defeated the troops of the Muslims, took a large number of captives, and probably fortified the place where Loulon stands, at a strategic point north of the city of Podandos that lay close to the Cilician Gates. He could have invested the entire year of 831 with the fortification works in Loulon and thus provoked a second campaign of Ma'mūn in 832.

In fact, the fortress of Loulon is mentioned in the Byzantine sources for the first time during the reign of emperor Theophilos.⁶⁶ That the fortress guarded the Byzantine territory from inroads from Muslim Cilicia through the Cilician Gates is often expressly mentioned. For example, in the Continuator we read: "there is a defence and stronghold called Loulon which is near and close to the city of Tarsos in Cilicia" (ἔρυμά τι καὶ φρούριον τῆ κατὰ Κιλικίαν Ταρσῶ πλησιάζον καὶ γειτονοῦν οὕτω καλούμενον Λοῦλον ἔστιν).⁶⁷ And in the fifth book of the same work, the so-called *Vita Basilii*, Basil I provides for the rebuilding of the ruined fortress of Loulon, which is qualified as a very mighty stronghold used in former times to defend the Roman Empire (πρώτον μὲν τὸ πλεῖστα τὴν Ῥωμαϊκὴν ἐπικράτειαν ὠφελοῦν ὀχυρώτατον κάστρον).⁶⁸

⁶⁵ See, however, Vasiliev (1935) 116–17: "Si, dans le récit de l'expédition de l'année précédente contra Héraclée, Tyane etc., il n'est pas fait mention de Lu'lu'a, cela prouve peut-être que les Arabes étaient parvenus à franchir les portes de Cilicie, en évitant Lu'lu'a."

⁶⁶ Hild and Restle (1981) 223–4.

⁶⁷ Th. Cont. IV.35 (197.12–14).

⁶⁸ Th. Cont. V.46 (277.19–21 / lines 2–4 in Ševčenko [2011]).

Even more important is the fact that the chronicle of Pseudo-Symeon attributes the building of the fortress of Loulon to the emperor Theophilus and Leo the Philosopher. According to him, the fortress was the first station of the famous chain of fire signals that were lighted on the top of a continuous series of fortresses between the Cilician Gates and the imperial palace at Constantinople in order to warn the emperor in 24 hours of a possible invasion of the Arabs through this point of the frontier. Here is the passage in Pseudo-Symeon:

Leo the Philosopher, after being appointed to preside over the see of Thessalonike, advised the emperor to make two clocks that should strike the hours synchronizedly; the one was placed in the stronghold of Cilicia, near Tarsos, the other was watched in the Palace, and both had each hour written with events in Syria, such as at the first hour, if some raid of the Saracens took place; at the second, if it was war; at the third, if a fire; at the fourth, if something else happened, and in the same way for the following hours. Accordingly, from among the twelve possible events, if eventually something happened in Syria, in the hour at which this event occurred, a light was lit by the men there, for there were persons who were in guard watching over with attention and care what was inscribed in them, and this light was immediately sent out from the stronghold called Loulon to the watchers at the mount Argaiia, and again to those at Samos, and to those at Aigilos, then again to those at the mount Mamas, from whence Kyrizos, then Mokilos, and from this last the mount of Saint Auxentios made it visible in short time to the stewards in charge at the balcony of the Pharos at the Palace.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Pseudo-Symeon 681.21–682.15: ὁ φιλόσοφος Λέων ὁ Θεσσαλονίκης γενόμενος πρόεδρος, τῷ βασιλεῖ Θεοφίλῳ συμβουλευσας, ὡς ὠρολόγια ἐποίησεν δύο ἐξ ἴσου κάμνοντα· καὶ τὸ μὲν ἐν ἐπὶ τῷ φρουρίῳ τῷ κατὰ Κιλικίαν τῇ Ταρσῷ πλησιάζον ἀπέθετο, τὸ δὲ ἕτερον ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ ἐφυλάττετο, ἅπερ εἶχον γεγραμμένα εἰς ἐκάστην ὥραν τὰ ἐν Συρίᾳ γενόμενα, οἷον τὴν πρώτην ὥραν εἰ ἐκδρομὴ τῶν Σαρακηνῶν γέγονε, τὴν β' εἰ πόλεμος, τὴν γ' εἰ ἐμπρησμός, τὴν δ' εἰ ἄλλο τι, καὶ εἰς τὰς λοιπὰς ὁμοίως. ἐκ τῶν γεγραμμένων οὖν δώδεκα ὑποθέσεων εἰ τι κἄν συνέβη ἐν Συρίᾳ, ἐν τῇ ὥρᾳ ἐν ἣ ἡ ὑπόθεσις γέγονεν, ἀνάπτων ἀπὸ τῶν ἐκεῖσε φανός, ἐπεὶ καὶ οἱ φυλάσσοντες καὶ ἀτενῶς καὶ ἀκριβῶς βλέποντες τὰ τετυπωμένα ἐν αὐτοῖς ἦσαν, μετεδίδοτο εὐθὺς ὁ φανός ἀπὸ τοῦ φρουρίου τοῦ λεγομένου Λούλου τοῖς κατὰ τὸν Ἀργαίαν βουνὸν καὶ αὐθις τοῖς κατὰ τὴν Σάμον καὶ τοῖς κατὰ τὸ Αἰγίλον, εἶτα τοῖς κατὰ τὸν Μάμαντα πάλιν βουνόν, ἀφ' οὗ ὁ Κύριζος, εἶτα ὁ Μώκιλος, ἀφ' οὗ ὁ τοῦ ἀγίου Αὐξεντίου βουνός τοῖς ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ κατὰ τὸν ἠλιακὸν τοῦ Φάρου δαιταριοῖς ἀφορισμένοις ἐν βραχεῖ ἐποίει φανερόν. The passage is inserted in the reign of Michael III, for this emperor purportedly suppressed this chain of fire signals after the alarm was given on one occasion during the races in the hippodrome, ruining his own triumph there as charioteer. The same story appears in Th. Cont. V.35, but here we do not find any mention of Theophilus or Leo the Philosopher.

The most probable date for the fortification of Loulon is the year 831, the only occasion Theophilus made an inroad into Arab Cilicia through the Cilician Gates and could observe in person the weak points of the defence of the Byzantine territory in south Cappadocia. If we suppose that the second Arab inroad into Cappadocia actually took place in 832 and not in 831, as is generally assumed, Theophilus could have had enough time in 831 to rebuild the fortress and to establish it as the starting point of an ambitious system of communications between the frontier and the capital. It is also of significance that a fortress watching the frontier with Cilicia was the place chosen to set off the alarm system announcing an Arab attack. This circumstance points also to 831 as the most likely date for the fortification of Loulon, as in the following years and especially during the second half of Theophilus' reign invasions through the Charsianon and Armeniakoi border became more frequent. It is also relevant that the setting up of the system was attributed to Leo the Philosopher, for this would mean, if our dating is sound, that in the year 831 he was already in favour with the iconoclastic emperor.

The importance of Loulon in the comprehensive defensive system conceived by the emperor could perhaps explain by itself why its siege by caliph Ma'mūn in HA 217 = 832 was singled out from the narrative of the second Muslim campaign in south Cappadocia. However, if we read attentively the account of the siege of Loulon in the Arabic sources, we can find additional evidence that also explains why the Arab historians did not connect this episode with the second Cappadocian campaign. I think that the main character in the siege of Loulon by the Muslims, Ma'mūn's commander 'Ujayf (whom the caliph put in charge of the besiegers), has something to do with this problem. Let us examine with some care the story told by our sources.

According to the *Book of the Sources*,⁷⁰ as the siege was prolonged, Ma'mūn fortified two military camps around Loulon and handed the command of the first to Jabala, and the second to his brother Abū Ishāq. He then parted and left 'Ujayf "as commander in chief of the troops that remained there". Some time later the Byzantine emperor (Theophilus is meant here) came to the rescue of the defenders of Loulon, but was defeated by the besiegers in a pitched battle. Theophilus' camp was taken by the Muslim troops, who seized considerable booty from it. The inhabitants of Loulon, seeing the defeat of the emperor, surrendered to 'Ujayf after he gave them the *aman* and guaranteed their lives. Then 'Ujayf occupied the city.

The story runs somewhat differently in Ṭabarī, for he says:

In this year, Ma'mūn invaded the Byzantine lands, and halted before and besieged Lu'lu'a for a hundred days. Then he withdrew from there and left as his deputy for the siege 'Ujayf, but the people of Lu'lu'a outwitted 'Ujayf and captured him so that he remained a prisoner in their hands for eight days until they set him free. Theophilus advanced on Lu'lu'a and surrounded 'Ujayf; but Ma'mūn dispatched further troops to Lu'lu'a, and Theophilus fell back before

⁷⁰ *Book of the Sources* 375, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 371.

making any contact with the Muslim army. So the people of Lu'lu'a marched forth to 'Ujayf under a guarantee of security.⁷¹

In this version of the episode, Theophilos surrounded the besiegers of Loulon and retired before the reinforcements sent by Ma'mūn appeared in place. There was accordingly no defeat of Theophilos at the hands of the besiegers and of 'Ujayf. It is however possible, as the narrative focuses on Loulon, that the reinforcements sent by Ma'mūn could in fact have defeated Theophilos but in another place further north, to which the emperor fell back probably in fear of being surrounded in turn between the Muslim besiegers of Loulon and fresh troops sent by the caliph. It is just a possibility that the reinforcements were led by 'Abbās, the son of Ma'mūn, who accompanied him on his two Cappadocian campaigns. The piece of information we have translated above from the *Book of the Sources*, stating that 'Abbās defeated Theophilos and seized much booty with his army, seems to fit well with the reported defeat of Theophilos before Loulon exposed in the same work a few lines below. It could be that we are facing here two different versions of the same event. This would be another piece of evidence suggesting that the second Cappadocian campaign of Ma'mūn actually took place in 832.

But let us return to our main argument: a likely reason why the account of the sources and particularly the so-called *Book of the Sources* duplicated Theophilos' defeat by the Muslim army in 832 could be that the information about the siege of Loulon was probably taken from an independent source which focused on the activities of 'Ujayf ibn 'Anbasa, the appointed commander of the besiegers of the fortress. This figure appears again in the narrative of Ṭabarī for HA 217 as having been sent by Ma'mūn against the governor of Jibāl in order to seize him and bring him before the caliph at Adana, where he was executed, as we have already seen, on the 16th of Jumādā I (19 June 832). 'Ujayf is also mentioned as being sent to arrest the governor of Jibāl in a short note Ṭabarī included in his report of HA 216.⁷² The possibility that all these pieces of information came originally from a single account is therefore alluring. That this information is lacking in Ibn Ṭayfūr suggests that Ṭabarī used a source other than him for these events.

14.5 Exchange of Letters Between the Emperor and the Caliph, and Ma'mūn's Stay in Egypt

The evidence we have seen until now suggesting a dating of 832 for the second Cappadocian campaign of Ma'mūn is substantially reinforced when we consider again the account of Ṭabarī, who was unsure, as we saw, about the actual reason for Ma'mūn campaigning a second time in Cappadocia. Ṭabarī tells us that in HA 216 (= spring/summer 831) the caliph set off against Byzantium when he heard

⁷¹ Ṭabarī III.1109, trans. Bosworth (1987) 194.

⁷² Ṭabarī III.1105, trans. Bosworth (1987) 189.

about the slaughter of the people of Tarsos and Mopsuestia, but he then gives as an alternative reason for the Muslim campaign that the emperor had written to the caliph “and put his own name first in his letter”. As noted earlier, Ṭabarī says that Maʿmūn did not even read the letter but set off immediately against Byzantium.⁷³ Apparently, the caliph considered the fact that the emperor named himself first offensive, although it followed the usual procedure of the Byzantine chancellery of putting the name of the sender before that of the addressee.⁷⁴ In HA 217 (= spring/summer 832) Ṭabarī speaks at length about a letter the emperor reportedly sent to the caliph this year offering him a lasting peace agreement between the two powers. Here Ṭabarī says again that Theophilos “put his own name first in his letter”. The content of the letter is then given, followed by an answer written by the caliph.⁷⁵ I think that Ṭabarī referred twice to the same letter sent by Theophilos to Maʿmūn, probably because he found it mentioned in two different sources.⁷⁶ The fact that in HA 216 Maʿmūn does not answer the emperor’s letter, whereas in HA 217 he does, does not contradict this supposition. For perhaps Maʿmūn’s reply to Theophilos was written when the caliph received in Adana a second letter from the emperor, mentioned by Ṭabarī in HA 216.⁷⁷

It is possible that Ṭabarī was conscious of the duplication but was not able to resolve it in a satisfactory way. However, the *Book of the Sources*, based on a similar source, suppressed the first mention of the letter and mentioned it just once in HA 217, adding that the caliph was seized by wrath on its reception.⁷⁸ This last dating must be the correct one, as we have argued above. Then, if the letter was actually sent in 832 and was the cause of the second expedition of Maʿmūn into south Cappadocia, this expedition could not have taken place before that year and its dating in HA 216 (= spring/summer 831) would be wrong. For his part, Yaʿqūbī omitted the reference to the emperor’s letter in HA 217 and mentioned it in HA 216, indicating that Maʿmūn did not want to read it because the emperor named himself first. So the emperor wrote him a second letter, in which the caliph was named first.⁷⁹ Now, it is interesting to note that Yaʿqūbī mentions this exchange of letters without any dating after a short account of the campaign of HA 216 and not before, as it appears in Ṭabarī. This is the same order followed by the *Book of the Sources*, but with the difference that the latter did not give any exact date for the campaign of HA 216 (it is dated “in the same year” after the mention of the campaign of HA 215) and also suppressed mention of the second letter

⁷³ Ṭabarī III.1104, trans. Bosworth (1987) 187–8.

⁷⁴ See the remark in Müller (2009) Regest 423.

⁷⁵ Ṭabarī III.1109–1110, trans. Bosworth (1987) 195. See Müller (2009) Regest 428.

⁷⁶ Accordingly, Regest 423 (dated in June 831) and 428 (dated to the end of 832 or the beginning of 833) in Müller (2009) actually refer to a single letter sent by the emperor after his summer campaign of 831 and before Maʿmūn set off for Byzantium in spring 832.

⁷⁷ Müller (2009) Regest 425.

⁷⁸ *Book of the Sources* 375, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 371.

⁷⁹ Yaʿqūbī 568, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 272–3.

from Theophilos (referred to in HA 217). This betrays the use of different sources for the account of the campaign, a circumstance which suggests that the Arab historians fabricated and incorrect chronological sequence of the events.

The content of Theophilos' letter as reported by Ṭabarī could perhaps provide us with some extra clues for the dating of the second Cappadocian expedition of Ma'mūn. First of all, if the letter offended diplomatic usage followed until then in the correspondence between caliphate and empire, surely this was not by chance or due to a slip of the Byzantine chancellery. Probably the offence was intentional; the letter could have been written after a victorious campaign such as the one Theophilos undertook in 831. It is therefore conceivable that the emperor, after performing a major triumph in the streets of Constantinople, wrote to the caliph in a haughty tone, disregarding previous diplomatic usages. The content of the letter speaks of an emperor who feels confident of his might, so that he can offer a peace agreement to the caliph in order to promote trade and commerce⁸⁰ but also threaten him with launching a massive attack on the caliphate. The end of the letter in Ṭabarī's wording does not leave room for any doubt about the emperor's resolution:

If you reject this peace offer, I shall not creep up on you secretly in an ambush, nor shall I speak to you in an ingratiating, misleading manner; but I shall penetrate into the innermost recesses of your land, take over against you its barriers and scatter its cavalry and infantry alike. And if I do this, it will be only after setting forth a valid excuse and after setting up between us the standard of decisive argument. Farewell.

If Theophilos, as is generally assumed, was already defeated in summer 831 by the caliph, how could he have written such a menacing letter by 832? Not even the deep anger felt after a humiliating defeat, which would have ruined his previous bombastic triumph in Constantinople, could explain this course of action. It is more reasonable to suppose that the emperor became bolder after his victorious raid in Cilicia in 831 had met with no response by the end of that year. He probably thought that he had retaliated with this expedition for the caliph's invasion of 830 and so established a balance of power between the two states. However, although Theophilos might even have considered that a further inroad into the caliphate would be as successful as the previous one, his peace offer was surely sincere, as he found that it would be advantageous for the two sides. His purported avoidance of every deceit or "secret ambush" in their mutual relations was also perhaps an undisguised allusion to the unexpected invasion of Cappadocia by the caliph in 830, which put a definitive end to the formal peace agreement the two states had respected until now, and this even despite the involvement of the caliph in Thomas' usurpation.

⁸⁰ For the importance of this point, see Chapter 18.1.

Ṭabarī says in HA 217 = 832 that Ma'mūn wrote back to the emperor and he reproduces also in his work the wording of the letter.⁸¹ Now, Ma'mūn threatens the emperor with the sending of bloodthirsty Muslim troops who scorn any danger they might suffer at the hands of the Byzantine soldiers and are only willing to cause them the utmost damage. However, at the end of the letter the caliph abstains from fulfilling his threats and proffers only a warning to the emperor, which is indeed an impossible choice: either Theophilos converts to Islam or he pays a tribute to the caliph. The conclusion of the letter runs as follows:

But if you choose not to make that, then you will clearly experience face-to-face our [martial] qualities to an extent which will make any effort [on my part] of eloquent speaking and an exhaustive attempt at description superfluous. Peace be upon him who follows the divine guidance!

We do not know when Ma'mūn wrote his answer to the emperor. If Ṭabarī is right and the caliph did not read the offensive letter from Theophilos,⁸² perhaps the reply was sent when the caliph was already in Adana in 832 and received a second letter from the emperor along with 500 Muslim captives to Ma'mūn. As we have seen, according to Ya'qūbī in this second letter, Theophilos put his name in second place. This makes it again most unlikely that the second Cappadocian campaign of the caliph took place in the summer of HA 216 = 831 immediately after Theophilos' triumph in Cilicia, as some time was needed for the letters to be exchanged. Whether Theophilos sent his letter at the end of 831 or at the beginning of 832, the caliph set off for the Byzantine frontier for a second time probably in the spring of 832, as he had done in his previous campaign of 830.

If our dating of the second Cappadocian campaign of Ma'mūn in 832 is sound, we now face the problem of establishing the movements of the caliph in the central months of the year 831, as he apparently did not face Theophilos' troops when they were raiding Muslim Cilicia. I think that the revolt in Egypt against Ma'mūn could offer us likely grounds for the apparently unexplained inactivity of the caliph during this year. Ṭabarī says in his account for HA 215 = 830 that Ma'mūn returned to Damascus after his first campaign against Byzantium. In his account for HA 216 = 831 Ṭabarī says that Ma'mūn returned again to Damascus after his second Cappadocian campaign and then inserts the following comment:

In this year, 'Abdūs al-Fihrī rose in rebellion, and he and his partisans attacked Abū Ishāq tax officials and killed several of them, this being in Sha'bān. Ma'mūn set out from Damascus for Egypt on Wednesday, the fifteenth of Dhū al-Ḥijjah.⁸³

⁸¹ Ṭabarī III.1110–1111, trans. Bosworth (1987) 196–7.

⁸² Ṭabarī III.1104, trans. Bosworth (1987) 188.

⁸³ Ṭabarī III.1105, trans. Bosworth (1987) 188.

Ṭabarī mentions Ma'mūn's arrival in Egypt in HA 217 as having taken place in the month of Muḥarram. As this month is the first of the Muslim calendar and Dhū al-Ḥijja is the last, the sequence implies that Ma'mūn set off for Egypt on the 15th of Dhū al-Ḥijja 216 (23 January 832) and arrived in Muḥarram 217 (February–March 832). However, it is interesting to note that the rebellion in Egypt broke out in Sha'bān of HA 216, that is to say between 13 September and 11 October of 831. It is possible that the rebellion had started earlier, since Ma'mūn's brother had left Egypt already in HA 215 = 830, but in any case Ma'mūn had to face two threats in the west at the end of the summer of 831: the Byzantine invasion of Cilicia and the uprising in Egypt. I think that he could not have ventured on an expedition against Byzantium before getting rid of the serious danger posed by the rebels in Egypt, for the land had been out of reach of the caliphate for many years since the Andalusian occupation of Alexandria in 814.⁸⁴ He may have waited some time before he finally set off from Damascus to Egypt in the winter, his hesitation being due to the problems caused by the Khurramites of Bābak in Azerbaijan and the rebellion of 'Alī ibn Hishām in Jibāl, which was finally suppressed in 832, as we have seen, by the aforementioned 'Ujayf. Ṭabarī speaks at length about the danger posed by the Khurramites in HA 217, when 'Alī was executed in Adana, but the problems must certainly have begun earlier in the year 831.

Nor can we rule out the possibility that the caliph knew too well that a campaign against Byzantium through the Cilician Gates could be extremely dangerous if the emperor was in position with his army controlling the passes. Moreover, a winter campaign was more practicable in Egypt than in the cold plains of Byzantine Anatolia.

Accordingly, several likely explanations can be advanced for the caliph not having taken the battlefield against the Byzantines in 831, although we cannot really be sure of his movements that year.

14.6 Some Conclusions on the Chronology of the Campaigns of 831–832

If we sum up our previous analysis we can now establish a more accurate sequence of events for the campaigns of 831–832 in Cilicia and Cappadocia.

In 831 the emperor set off on a campaign against Cilicia. Perhaps even before crossing southwards through the Cilician Gates he defeated the Muslim Cilicians in a pitched battle and then pillaged some of their cities (Tarsos, Mopsuestia at least, maybe also Adana, Eirenoupolis and Anazarba), taking much booty and many captives. The possibility that another Byzantine army entered the territory of the caliphate at the same time through Charsianon is not to be excluded, but the Greek source which speaks of a victorious campaign of the Persian troops of Theophilos (see above in section 14.2) gives no further details which could enable us to date or identify this campaign.

⁸⁴ For this date see Signes Codoñer (2005).

Theophilus decided by then to fortify the fortress of Loulon in order to watch the southern frontier of Cappadocia and detect any arrival of Muslim troops coming from the Cilician Gates. Perhaps at this time Leo the Philosopher devised Loulon as the first station in a chain of fire points designed to forewarn Constantinople, in a matter of hours, of the approach of Muslim troops coming from Cilicia. The emperor held a major triumphal celebration in the capital, probably in the summer, that was meticulously recorded and has come to us through its later inclusion in the *Book of Ceremonies*. Arab historians of the time, mainly relying for their narratives on the witness paid by participants in the caliphal expeditions on their return to Iraq,⁸⁵ did not have available a detailed account of the Byzantine campaign of 831, for the obvious reason that the caliph did not take part in it. This circumstance explains why they mention this campaign only in passing.

The caliph, busy with the insurrection in Egypt and the problems posed by the Khurramites in many provinces, apparently did not react immediately. He knew perhaps that an attack through the Cilician Gates could be risky, as Theophilus was there with his army. Theophilus sent him a letter, perhaps as early as autumn 831, offering him the renewal of the peace agreement openly broken by Ma'mūn's campaign of 830. However, the wording of the missive was insulting to the caliph, not because Theophilus named himself first in it, but probably because the offer was interpreted as a gracious concession coming from a victorious emperor. The caliph set off again for Byzantium in the year 832. He remained in Cilician Adana for some time, as if reassembling his troops before crossing the Cilician Gates. On 16th of Jumādā I (19 June 832) he executed there the governor of Jibāl. He also met there the envoys of the emperor Theophilus, who apparently renewed his offer of peace and brought 500 Muslim captives back (probably taken in the campaign of 831).⁸⁶

Notwithstanding, Ma'mūn refused to sign a peace agreement and entered Byzantine territory on the 19th of Jumādā I (22 June 832) through the Cilician Gates with a big army and accompanied by his brother Abū Ishāq and his son 'Abbās. First of all, Ma'mūn besieged the fortress of Loulon that had been fortified the previous year by Theophilus and barred his way into Cappadocia. But it was perhaps dangerous to remain there for long, as the emperor could be approaching with his army. So Ma'mūn left 'Ujayf ibn 'Ansaba in Loulon as commander of the besiegers and then proceeded further inland with the remaining troops. The movements of the army of the caliph are rather confused from this point on, as Ṭabarī and the *Book of the Sources*, our main sources, name different agents of the events and also different places that are not always clearly identified. We have already seen how Ṭabarī makes Ma'mūn proceed first to the city of Anṭiḡhū,⁸⁷ on

⁸⁵ On the perspective of the sources for the campaign of 838 in Ṭabarī see mainly Chapter 17.2; and on the role paid by 'Ujayf as witness and informant of the campaign of 832 see above section 14.3.

⁸⁶ Müller (2009) Regest 425.

⁸⁷ Hild and Restle (1981) 142–3.

the northern route departing from Loulon, and then to Herakleia,⁸⁸ which lay in the south, to the east of Loulon. Both cities surrendered to the caliph. In Ṭabarī Ma'mūn makes his brother Abū Ishāq capture 30 fortresses and strongholds in the Maṭāmīr region to the north of Tyana, whereas another general, Yaḥyā ibn Akhtam, apparently raided the region around Tyana. 'Abbās is nowhere mentioned in the account of Ṭabarī.

The *Book of the Sources* mentions Ma'mūn marching only against Herakleia and not in connection with the siege and surrender of Anṭīghū.⁸⁹ Indeed it makes little sense for Ma'mūn to have gone as far as Anṭīghū in the north just to turn back to the south for Herakleia. It is perhaps more logical that the caliph took the eastwards route to Herakleia after leaving Loulon whereas his brother and son proceeded to the north with the other generals. It would make sense to identify the fortress of Anṭīghū with Loulon, but Anṭīghū seems to be located in the Maṭāmīr region to the north of Tyana. Moreover, the *Book of the Sources* makes 'Abbās march in succession against the fortresses of Anṭīghū, Aḥrab (modern Keçikalesi)⁹⁰ and Ḥaşīn. The location of the first two is clear (see Map 2) and their capture by 'Abbās makes sense, as they lay on the eastward route leading from Tyana to Salaberina. The location of the third is problematic, since Hild and Restle suggest Sasima, which lay to the north of Tyana.⁹¹ The *Book of the Sources* mentions also the activities of Abū Ishāq, who took 12 fortresses (instead of the 30 of Ṭabarī) “named Khardaylah”, which probably lay in the Maṭāmīr region.⁹² So it could be that the caliph remained in the south around Herakleia, whereas his son 'Abbās plundered the route leading to Koloneia and his brother Abū Ishāq the Maṭāmīr region.

Theophilos may have descended from Kaisareia along the route that led to Podandos⁹³ and then have proceeded to Loulon in order to help the besieged Byzantine garrison. This could have caused serious difficulties for the Arab general 'Ujayf, who had been appointed commander of the besiegers. However, the caliph, still in Herakleia, sent reinforcements to the besiegers according to Ṭabarī⁹⁴ (perhaps the neighbouring troops of Abū Ishāq that were in the vicinity of Tyana) so that Theophilos was convinced to retire to the north before being surrounded. This made an encounter with the caliph's son 'Abbās unavoidable, as

⁸⁸ Hild and Restle (1981) 188–90.

⁸⁹ *Book of the Sources* 374, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 371.

⁹⁰ Hild and Restle (1981) 135–7.

⁹¹ Hild and Restle (1981) 272–3. See also Vasiliev (1935) 112, note 1.

⁹² See Vasiliev (1935) 111, note 1 and Hild and Restle (1981) 181, 200–201 for a possible identification of the place.

⁹³ Hild (1977) 122–3.

⁹⁴ “Ma'mun dispatched further troops to Lu'lu'a and Theophilos fell back before making any contact with the Muslim army” in Bosworth (1987) 194. As we have seen, in the account of Ya'qūbī (Vasiliev [1935] 273) Theophilos is defeated by the besiegers of Loulon, who seize great booty from his camp, but this could be only an echo of the later defeat of the emperor by 'Abbās. Nevertheless, a minor encounter between the besiegers and Theophilos where the former got the upper hand is not to be ruled out.

he barred the route leading to Koloneia. The defeat of Theophilos by the army of ‘Abbās mentioned in the *Book of the Sources* could therefore have taken place in the region north of Tyana.

This is naturally only one reconstruction among many of the movements both armies might have followed in the summer campaign of 832. In the end Theophilos was probably defeated by the troops of ‘Abbās, but his coming to Loulon while the troops of the caliph were still in the inner regions further north, as I think was the case, is to be considered without any doubt a bold move and a sign that he felt confident enough to risk an encounter. The caliph, on the contrary, remained near the Cilician Gates that led to the Muslim-held Cilicia, moving between Loulon and Herakleia and sending his son and his brother to the northern regions.

14.7 Ma’mūn’s Third Campaign in Cappadocia in 833

That the outcome of the second Cappadocian campaign in 832 was perhaps not entirely satisfactory for Ma’mūn is proved by the events of 833.⁹⁵ Ṭabarī tells us that Ma’mūn sent his son ‘Abbās to Tyana in the spring in order to fortify the city.⁹⁶ As no military action was undertaken before that, one is tempted to suppose that Tyana had remained in Muslim hands since the previous campaign of 832, like the stronghold of Loulon further south. Be this as it may, Ṭabarī describes the caliph’s ambitious building program for Tyana to provide the city with substantial walls. This can only mean that the caliph was trying to establish a steady base for his future attacks against Cappadocia, as the experience gained in the previous years had made it clear to him that any further incursion deep into Byzantine territory would otherwise be too risky.

While ‘Abbās was busy with this large-scale building program, the caliph levied troops from Egypt, Syria and other regions of Iraq, surely with the intention of leading a large invasion of the empire. Ya’qūbī makes Ma’mūn even exclaim that he will summon Arabs from the desert and let them be settled in each city conquered along the way until he reached Constantinople.⁹⁷ This boast of the caliph has occasionally been taken seriously in modern research, as if it reflected the plans of the caliph for conquering the empire,⁹⁸ but it must be approached with some reserve.⁹⁹ Such an ambitious project is not only unsupported by further evidence but also does not fit with the real possibilities available to the caliphate at the moment.

⁹⁵ For further details see Vasiliev (1935) 121–4.

⁹⁶ Ṭabarī III.1111–12, trans. Bosworth (1987) 198–9.

⁹⁷ Ya’qūbī vol. 2, 573, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 274.

⁹⁸ See for example Sivers (1982) 78–9 and Yücesoy (2009) 113.

⁹⁹ Bonner (1996) 148 writes that “this sort of archaism appears in many of Ma’mūn’s pronouncements and gestures”. Crone and Hinds (1986) 94–6 refer to a certain restoration of the Umayyad concept of the caliphate by Ma’mūn that fits in well with such political pronouncements.

As we shall see in Chapter 17, the campaign of 838 led by Mu‘taṣim, probably even more ambitious than the one of 833, did not aim to conquer Constantinople despite the claims put in the mouth of the caliph by some Arab historians. If Ma‘mūn ever intended to conquer Constantinople – and the boast was not simply invented by Arab historians in order to magnify the ambition of his campaign, frustrated by the caliph’s untimely death – then either the caliph did so in a propagandistic manner in front of his Christian foes or else he really believed in the apocalyptic prophecies abounding at the time.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, one gets the impression that this story is somehow a variant of the boasts put in Theophilos’ mouth in the letter he wrote to the caliph after his victory of 831 (see above in section 14.5). Moreover, we know that there were also prophecies announcing the impending end of the Abbasids (see Chapter 22). Accordingly, I would not discard the possibility that the threats and ambitious plans of Ma‘mūn were to a great extent part of a psychological war waged by both powers. But, however it might have been, it is clear that the fortification of Tyana could have easily been a first step in a far-reaching project of Ma‘mūn to settle new colonies north of the Cilician Gates.

We do not know whether the caliph finally set off for Byzantium leading this huge army, for Ṭabarī says that some of the new recruited troops actually marched off without him and reached Tyana, encamping there with ‘Abbās. The caliph finally entered Byzantine land only on the 16th of Jumādā II (9 July 833) from Tarsos, probably after the region had been secured for him by the troops previously dispatched.¹⁰¹ This was perhaps the signal for an all-embracing attack against Cappadocia, but this never took place, because the caliph soon became ill at Podandos and died. He was buried in the neighbouring city of Tarsos, to the south of the Cilician Gates.

Mas‘ūdī provides us with additional information about this failed campaign of Ma‘mūn. According to him, Ma‘mūn invited the Greek garrisons of many strongholds to embrace Islam, threatening them with the yoke and the sword if they resisted. As a consequence, many converted to Islam. This piece of information, without further evidence, seems likely to be a further product of the caliph’s propaganda, as does the next one transmitted by Mas‘ūdī concerning a letter Theophilos purportedly sent to Ma‘mūn when he was already in Podandos. In it the emperor promised to pay the caliph for the expenses arising from the campaign and even to release many of the Muslim prisoners he retained, provided Ma‘mūn ceased his projected invasion. This letter seems very similar to the one Theophilos supposedly sent to the caliph Mu‘taṣim after the capture of Amorion in 838 (see

¹⁰⁰ Yücesoy (2009) 116: “While Ma‘mūn made his political and military decisions in a concrete historical context, his response to the Byzantine emperor revealed that he was not only aware of the implications of his conquests, but also that he consciously aligned his actions with messianic expectations.” See also Chapter 22.

¹⁰¹ For the embassy to the Frankish emperor Louis I sent by Theophilos during this summer, perhaps when the news of the invading army reached Constantinople, see Chapter 18.2.

Chapter 17.4). Curiously enough, Mas‘ūdī does not mention this second letter in that year. As in 838, the reply Ma‘mūn gave to the Byzantine messenger was full of fury and threatened to leave no stone standing in the Byzantine fortresses. After that Mas‘ūdī adds the following comment:

The caliph continued then his march and he did not come back before he had taken fourteen strongholds. Only then he returned and encamped in the spring of Podandos, better known with the name of Qushaira, as we mentioned it in the previous pages.¹⁰²

It is impossible to say which fortresses were taken then by the caliph, but I wonder whether in fact any were taken, because the whole narrative of Mas‘ūdī, who does not say a single word about any other campaign of Ma‘mūn, has an undeniably propagandistic flavour. The only certain fact is that the caliph reached Podandos, close to the Cilician Gates, and died there. However ambitious his designs for Byzantium, he did not risk entering Byzantine territory again and entrusted the vanguard of the army to his son ‘Abbās.

The death of Ma‘mūn put a temporary end to the campaigning of the caliphate in eastern Anatolia until 837. The heir and successor of Ma‘mūn, his brother Abū Ishāq (Mu‘taṣim), had many problems to cope with in the caliphate and did not want to take any risks abroad before solving them. Setting aside the Khurramite problem, which has been dealt with in Chapters 9–11, a major issue for him was the role Ma‘mūn’s son was to play in his reign. ‘Abbās’ upheaval against his uncle and his final execution by Mu‘taṣim on the charge of going over to the Byzantines and betrayal of Islam¹⁰³ could have given rise to the legend of the conversion of the caliph to Christendom narrated in the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, as we shall see in Chapter 22.

But concerning more particularly the attitude of the new caliph with regard to the Byzantine Empire, the silence of the sources speaks clearly for a new period of mutual understanding. It is sufficient for us to say that one of the first decisions taken by the new caliph was to demolish the walls erected by Ma‘mūn in Tyana.¹⁰⁴ We do not know whether this act was unilateral or the result of some kind of formal agreement with the Byzantines, as no record has survived about the background to this decision. But it is perhaps not infeasible to suppose that the new caliph pursued some compensation for withdrawing his troops to the Cilician Gates. Byzantine diplomacy may well have been behind this move. In the end, the outcome of the continuous warfare in east Anatolia between 830 and 833 was not so negative for Theophilus as may appear at first sight. In fact, the likely takeover of the fortress at Loulon by the Byzantines (the fortress was apparently not pulled down in 832) was to mean a serious blow for future Arab inroads into the area.

¹⁰² Mas‘ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold* 96, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 330.

¹⁰³ Mich. Syr. 539, trans. Chabot (1905) vol. 3, 101.

¹⁰⁴ Vasiliev (1935) 124.

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Chapter 15

Byzantine Expeditions in Western Armenia Between 834 and 836

The many internal problems caliph Mu‘tašim had to tackle after his rise to power in 833 sufficiently explain why he was prevented from invading Byzantine territory in the years that followed. The raids on both sides of the Cilician frontier seem therefore to have come to a provisory end with the death of Ma’mūn. The abandonment of the projected fortification of Tyana by Mu‘tašim, followed perhaps by a Byzantine takeover of Loulon, clearly evidences the will of both parties to dampen the fighting in this area for some time. The tension, however, was displaced to the east as a result mainly of the contacts the Persian Khurramites made with Byzantium and also of the settlement in the empire of many of them after December 833, as we saw in Chapter 10. Theophilos probably took the opportunity of opening up a new front on the Armenian border as soon as the first contingents of Khurramites arrived in the empire seeking Byzantine help in their war against the caliph. The proclamation of Theophobos as exousiastes or prince of the Persians (see Chapter 11.4) was a clear signal to the caliphate that a new conflict was soon to start at the Armenian frontier.

However, Arab and Greek sources say practically nothing of Byzantine expeditions in this area before Theophilos took to the battlefield against Melitene, Sozopetra and Arsamosata in 837, an action that we will analyse in Chapter 16. The silence of these sources is perhaps understandable, for no direct confrontation between the Roman and the Muslim empires (the main subject of the historical writers of the time) was then possible in the Armenian lands, which were atomized in confusion of Muslim and Armenian lordships under the nominal sovereignty of the caliph and his governor at Dvin. Both powers tried to control the strategic Armenian territory indirectly by attracting the local rulers with titles and privileges.¹

For the caliph the matter at issue was mainly balancing the power between the Muslim autonomous landlords and the Armenian princely houses in order to keep control of the territory and avoid uprisings against Baghdad. It was surely this aim that moved Hārūn al-Rashīd to appoint in 806 Ashot I Msaker, of the Bagratid house, prince of Armenia, as a counterbalance to the local Persian and Arab rulers of Armenia who were constantly defying the authority of the caliphate.²

The Byzantines, also tried to gain support for their policy among the Christian Armenians, as they had always done. They surely took advantage of the

¹ Martin-Hisard (2000).

² Grousset (1947) 341–2, Laurent (1919) 98–9 and Laurent and Canard (1980) 131–2.

circumstance that many Armenian soldiers and princely houses had established themselves in Byzantium in the previous decades. Moreover, as we have seen in Chapters 3–8, the Byzantine court was controlled by Armenians during the second iconoclastic period. After the Persian Khurramites fled to the empire in 833, the conjuncture seemed favourable for the intervention of the Byzantines in the area, since the caliphate was immersed in internal problems.

15.1 Stephen of Taron on the Campaigns of Theophilos

Stephen Asoghik of Taron,³ who wrote in the eleventh century, has preserved a brief but detailed account of the raids the Byzantines made on western Armenia during the reign of Theophilos. The passage is well known to scholars, who have made abundant use of it. However, the scholarly consensus is that the account of Stephen refers only to one single victorious campaign, that of Theophilos in 837.⁴ On a closer look, it appears however that Stephen mentions this campaign only as the culmination of a series of previous raids of the Byzantines on western Armenia.⁵ Let us examine the passage before further commenting upon it. I reproduce here the English translation Timothy Greenwood has kindly provided (paragraphs are mine):⁶

1. Then in 278 of the Era, Michael died and his son Theophilos became king for 13 years.
2. In his days, the Horomider came to the district of Basean and they massacred many with the sword and attacked the komopolis of Gomadzor.
3. Then Theophilos went to Khagtik' [Chaldia] and went to the land [C'amak'] bridge and captured many of the Armenians with their families and he conferred

³ Samuel of Ani repeats in his *Chronological Tables* some of the information given by Stephen Asoghik about this campaign of Theophilos, perhaps because both of them consulted the lost history of Sahpuh Bagratuni. However, Samuel does not include any reference to this spring campaign of Theophilos. The reasons are unknown, but lack of space is a probable cause (he could only include some brief topics in his tables).

⁴ See especially Marquart (1930) 41–57 and Laurent (1980) 249–52, 267–8.

⁵ Timothy Greenwood had come to the same conclusion independently from me when I contacted him in summer 2006 over some questions concerning the interpretation of this passage. I am greatly indebted to his advice on the understanding of the problems posed by this passage. See Greenwood (2008) 348–9.

⁶ There are other translations into modern languages: Modern Greek in Bartikian (1994); German in Gelzer and Burckhardt (1907); French in Dulaurier (1883) 171. Dulaurier translated Books I–II (called part I) and therefore our passage, whereas Macler (1917) translated only Book III (called confusingly part II). A commentary of the passage is in Marquart (1903) 421–3 and (1930) 41–57.

the honour of the office of *hiwpatavor* [ὑπάτος] that is to say the office of *patrik apuhiwpat* [πατρικίος ἀπὸ ὑπάτων] upon Ashot son of Shapuh and he left him in the district of Sper. And he himself, on receiving tax from the inhabitants of Theodosiopolis, returned from there.

4. And then the men of Horomid came to Vanand, to the village of Kachkak'ar; they were destroyed by Sahak, son of Ismayēl.

5. And in the same year, Theophilos penetrated Syria and took the city of Urbeli and fought with the Arabs at Almulat [Arsamosata] and triumphed. This man during his march to the eastern part of the province of Armenia, took Tsmu the Armenian fortress, Asaghin, Metskert and Aghberd in the district of Gegham; and he rendered Khozan and Fourth Armenia deserted by man and beast. Stephen Asoghik II.6.

There is no exact dating for all the events mentioned in this passage, but they have been linked with the campaign of 837 because the text of Stephen says in §5 that “in the same year” Theophilos entered Syria and took Arsamosata. Since we know from many sources that the campaign of Theophilos against Melitene, Sozopetra and Arsamosata actually took place in the summer of 837 (see Chapter 16), most scholars supposed that the events mentioned by Stephen Asoghik in §§2–4 are also to be dated to 837, probably some months earlier in the spring, because Theophilos went into battle against Melitene at the beginning of the summer. However, the temporal adverbs that introduce §§3–4 (translated as “then”) indicate that the author is describing a consecutive series of events, following each other, but do not demand that all of them took place in the same year.⁷ On the contrary, the precision “in the same year” which introduces §5 was probably intended to connect this paragraph with the previous §4, but not with §§2–3.⁸ If all the events listed in §§2–5 had actually taken place in the same year and the author knew of it, then he would probably have used the reference “in the same year” instead of “then” to introduce §§3–4.

Accordingly, it is perfectly conceivable that the author referred in this passage not to a single campaign of Theophilos, but to a series of campaigns of the Byzantines, which took place over consecutive years. As matter of fact, we face

⁷ Bartikian (1994) 127 translates the beginning of this section as follows: *ἔπειτα, ἀφοῦ ἦλθαν στήν ἐπαρχία...* Gelzer and Burckhardt (1907) 107 include the adverb inside the temporal clause: “Als *nun* die Horomdäer nach dem Dorfe Kachakhar im Distrikte von Wanand gekommen waren ...”. Dulaurier (1883) 171 does not translate any temporal adverb, as he perhaps considered that the temporal clause alone rendered rightly the sense of the phrase.

⁸ Timothy Greenwood points out to me that it is also possible, even likely, that the paragraph was originally intended to be introduced with a note, which included a specific Armenian era date, which was not retained by Stephen but omitted.

serious problems when trying to make sense of the movements described in this passage if we try to force them into a single campaign. A detailed analysis of the text will follow in the next pages in order to trace a likely explanation for the military routes mentioned in this passage.

We must first make sense of the Horomider⁹ or men of Horomid cited in §2 and §4 to understand what was going on. Against previous interpretations such as that advanced by Marquart to the effect that Stephen uses this term to refer simply to the Romans,¹⁰ I subscribe to the idea of Bartikian that our text refers to the Persian Khurramites serving in Theophilos' army.¹¹ The fact that the Khurramites are mentioned without any explanation by an eleventh-century Armenian historian is not surprising when we consider that Stephen only copied his account from a contemporary source, where the significance of the term was self-evident. Marquart even supposed that Stephen used the lost history of Shapuh Bagratuni, direct witness to events.¹² Although this point is difficult to prove,¹³ the information provided for the campaign of Theophilos is so detailed and exact in contrast to the account of the previous Roman emperors that it seems unavoidable to conclude that Stephen Asoghik used a well-informed source when he mentioned these expeditions. We could therefore play with the idea that the Khurramites raided the regions of Basean and Vanand during the reign of Theophilos, as they were probably trusted with the defence of the Armeniakoi frontier. They could have had their headquarters in the capital of this theme, in Amaseia.¹⁴

Let us now consider the sequence of events described in this passage. A campaign of Theophilos seems to begin in §3 when the emperor enters Armenian lands from the Byzantine theme of Chaldia. Although the exact place at which Theophilos crossed the frontier, the "land-bridge" of the text,¹⁵ has not been

⁹ According to Greenwood this could be an early medieval Armenian plural in -er.

¹⁰ Marquart (1930) 42, note 2.

¹¹ Bartikian (1994) 128–30. See Chapters 9–10 for the Khurramites.

¹² Marquart (1930) 42–4.

¹³ Book II of Stephen ends with chapter 6, which includes a list of the Roman emperors "to this day". The last mentioned emperors are Theophilos and Michael III, so that it seems probable that the source used by Stephen ended in the latter's time. However, the text of the summer campaign of Theophilos is very corrupted and Marquart (1930) 42 conjectured that this section pertained to the end of a quaternio before the beginning of book III, so that it is also possible that some text is now lost and that the original list continued after Michael III. One last point is, however, also worth taking into account when considering the reliability of the account of Stephen Asoghik. The son of Ashot Bagratuni, consul in Sper, mentioned in the above passage was probably the historian Shapuh Bagratuni, whom Marquart considers the main source for the History of Stephen. If this is so, the account of Stephen Asoghik is even more valuable than is generally admitted. However, as we will argue in Chapter 16.2, it is possible that Stephen based his work on a Greek source. In this case, it could be that Stephen did so through the mediation of Shapuh's work.

¹⁴ For a seal of Theophobos probably found in Trebizond, see Chapter 11.3 and Figure 2.

¹⁵ Bartikian (1994) 127, note 38.

identified,¹⁶ it is possible to think of it in terms of a mountain pass, perhaps one through the Pontic Mountains that linked the Byzantine coastal lands around Trebizond with the mainland in the south, where Sper and Theodosiopolis lay.

Accordingly, the attack on a village in the Armenian region of Basean that comes before in §2 might not have been part of the same expedition, as Basean lies immediately to the east of Theodosiopolis. Only if we think that the Khurramites cited in §2 entered the territory in advance as a kind of vanguard of the main army could their mention before the main expedition led by Theophilos make sense. However, this sequence is not supported by any indication in the text. It remains as a possibility that the expedition of the Khurramites in §2 was different from the one led by Theophilos in Sper and Theodosiopolis in §3, despite the fact that the regions targeted, Basean in §2 and Karin (whose capital was Theodosiopolis) in §3, border each other (see Map 3).



Map 3 Byzantine expeditions in western Armenia between 834 and 836

It could also be that the Khurramites mentioned in §2 attacked the region of Basean in their march to the west coming from Azerbaijan, that is to say, c. 833 before they integrated into the Byzantine army. But what then about the action the Khurramites undertook in §4 at Vanand? They are mentioned again alone, without any explicit connection with Theophilos' army. The region of Vanand attacked by them lies to the northeast of the Basean, as we can see in Map 3, so that the

¹⁶ If we understand C'amak' as a place name, it could theoretically refer to Kamakha, but this locality is too far south (on the left bank of the Euphrates) and does not make sense here.

Khurramites this time certainly came from the west, since they had previously raided in Basean. On the other hand, it makes no sense that the Khurramites marched further east when Theophilos, as the text says in §3, had already left Theodosiopolis and “returned from there”, surely back to Byzantium. Why should the Khurramites have parted from the imperial main army after the emperor had already settled the matters in Theodosiopolis and turned back to the Byzantine territory? Theirs was surely a different expedition from the one led by Theophilos mentioned in §3. If we give credence to the text, which expressly says in §5 that “in the same year” Theophilos attacked Syria and Arsamosata and ravaged the Fourth Armenia, the attack in Vanand should have taken place in 837, for we know well through oriental sources that this campaign dated from that year (see below in this chapter). However, just a look at the map suffices to show that Vanand and the Fourth Armenia lie far away from each other, so that Theophilos and the Khurramites evidently pursued different targets and led different expeditions. Since the year 837 saw the final Abbasid offensive against the Khurramites in Azerbaijan, it could be that by making a separate offensive on two different fronts, Theophilos tried to divert the Muslim forces attacking Bābak and lighten the pressure exerted on him. Nevertheless, the sources that report the victorious campaign of 837 are absolutely silent about a northern almost contemporary offensive of the Khurramites in Vanand ending in a complete failure, which seems difficult to explain.

We can therefore conclude that §§4–5 refer to two different campaigns led respectively by the Khurramites and the emperor. The second being dated in 837, the previous one must have taken place shortly before, for it is mentioned as happening “in the same year”. On the other hand, §§2–3 refer to two further campaigns of uncertain dating, but in any case after December 833, because the first Khurramites fled to the empire at this date. Because some time would be needed to organize the Khurramites into a well-trained army in the service of the empire, I think that 834 is the first possible year for the campaign mentioned in §2. Whether the raid of the Khurramites in Basean referred to in §2 was connected with the campaign of Theophilos in Sper and Karin described in §3 cannot be ascertained, so that they might even have taken place in successive years.

Nevertheless, the main problem in interpreting this passage remains the extremely laconic narrative of the author, who limited himself to a concise summary of the facts. He (or his source) focused on the impact of the campaign on Armenian territory, leaving aside other aspects that seemed secondary to him, like the targets aimed at by the Byzantine army, the exact route followed in the campaigns or the role played by the main actors in the area, the Georgian and Armenian Bagratids. But perhaps we can find additional evidence in the Greek sources.

15.2 The Abasgian Campaign and the Iberian Bagratids

The Continuator mentions briefly and without any dating a failed campaign “in Abasgia” led by Theophobos and Bardas, the brother of Theodora. According to

the historian, who is the only source to mention the facts, the expedition ended in a complete failure and only a few soldiers returned to Byzantium.¹⁷ This is the only time a Greek source mentions a defeat of the Khurramite troops led by Theophobos in the Caucasus and the temptation is great to identify it with the massacre of the Khurramites mentioned in §4 of the passage from Stephen Asoghik we have just discussed. However, the places where the two defeats took place seem to be quite distant from each other, as Abasgia lies to the northwest of the Lesser Caucasus range and Vanand to the south. Accordingly, Bartikian denied any possible campaign in Abasgia and thought that the Continuator was referring rather to the campaign that took place in Armenian lands, mentioned in §4 of the passage from Stephen Asoghik. For this scholar the mention of “Abasgia” in the Continuator is a mistake.¹⁸

On the contrary, I think that we have no special reason to suspect the reference to Abasgia in the Greek text to be wrong (it is indeed the only precise detail of the brief account of the expedition!). It is the context of the “Abasgian” campaign of Theophobos and Bardas that is lacking for us, but if we were able to provide a likely background for it, then perhaps we would not need to amend the Greek text. Let us now look for this context.

In §4 Stephen Asoghik mentions a certain Sahak, son of Ismayēl, as responsible for the slaughter of the Khurramites. This person, to be identified with Ishāq ibn Ismā‘īl, the Muslim emir of Tiflis (833?–853), provides us with a starting point for our research.

The Georgian Principality of Bagarat Bagratuni, running along the Kyros river to the west of Tiflis, perhaps offers a clue for the expedition. Different branches of the Bagratid family were slowly extending their power in Iberia (Kartli) with the support of the caliphate, which wanted to check the rebellious Muslim lords in Armenia through them, as we said earlier. Ashot Bagratuni was accordingly recognized as prince of Georgia by the caliph but also designated *curopalates* by Leo the Armenian, who probably wanted to establish a foothold in the region. Ashot ruled in the regions of Klarjeth, Kolaver and Aratahan from c. 807 to 833, pursuing a balance between the two mighty neighbouring powers. This policy could not prevent Ashot from being pushed to the Byzantine frontier by the Arab governor of Armenia, but in the end he managed to remain in power. At his death his son Bagarat (c. 833–876) inherited the principality, but was immediately fought off by the emirs of Tiflis, especially by the already-mentioned Ishāq ibn

¹⁷ Th. Cont. III.39 (137.16–18): καὶ αὐθις ἐν Ἀβασγίᾳ ὁ τε Θεόφοβος καὶ ὁ τῆς Θεοδώρας ἀδελφὸς Βάρδας ἀποσταλέντες μετὰ στρατιάς ἰσχυρῶς ἐδυστύχησαν, ὀλίγων ἄγαν ἐκέϊθεν ὑποστρεψάντων: “and Theophobos and Bardas, Theodora’s brother, being sent again to Abasgia with a big army, suffered disgrace with just a few men coming back home from there”.

¹⁸ Bartikian (1994) 130–31. See also Laurent and Canard (1980) 67, note 108 for the previous consensus for a dating of the Abasgian campaign of the Continuator to 837 according to Stephen Asoghik.

Ismāʿīl, who pushed him back into the mountains of Klarjeth and forced him to pay tribute. As Bagarat held the power during the reign of Theophilos (he was also appointed *curopalates*, although at a later stage, perhaps c. 862), it is probable that the emperor tried to secure his position and win him over to the Byzantine side.¹⁹

Now, Ashot had married his daughter to the king of the Abasgians Theodosios II, who was to provide him with military support in his wars against the Muslims.²⁰ Abasgia was at the beginning of the ninth century a very extensive kingdom stretching from present-day Abkhazia in the north to the mouth of the river Akampsis in the south and therefore comprising Kolchis and Lazika. During the eighth century the territory was ruled by dukes recognized by Constantinople but who then rebelled against the empire in the last decades of the century, when Leo II (the father of Theodosios II) seized Egrisi and took the title of king of the Abasgians.²¹ The Abasgians were a branch of the Georgian people so that a mutual understanding between the Abasgians and the Iberian Bagratids against the Armenian warlords or Muslim emirates of the Caucasus was surely conceivable. This alliance as well as the seizure of traditional Iberian lands by the kingdom of the Abasgians could perhaps explain why the Continuator referred to a campaign in the region with the broad geographical term “Abasgia”, especially as the influence of the kingdom of the Abasgians continued to increase during the ninth and the beginning of the tenth century, near to the time when the Continuator wrote his history.²² If this interpretation holds true, then we could perhaps identify the defeat of the Khurramites at “Abasgia” mentioned by the Continuator with the routing of the Khurramites in Vanand, to which Stephen Asoghik refers in §4, for Vanand borders the territory of the Iberian Bagratids.

More importantly, the campaign referred to by the Continuator took place “in Abasgia”, but was not necessarily aimed at the Abasgians as is repeatedly stated in modern studies.²³ The Continuator just says that Theophobos and Bardas were sent to Abasgia with a large army and that the Byzantines suffered heavy losses, but does not specify at whose hands. Surely, the proclamation of the kingdom of the Abasgians at the end of the ninth century was directed against the interests of Constantinople in the area, as the Georgian chronicles say. And probably Constantinople had every motive to regret the *de facto* independence of Abasgia. But it is still possible that the kingdom, though autonomous, still acknowledged the

¹⁹ Grousset (1947) 344–5 and 352–3, Martin-Hisard (2000) 437–42, and Laurent and Canard (1980) 137–9.

²⁰ *Book of K'art'li* 259: “At that time Ashot *curopalates* set out on a campaign. Theodosios, king of the Apkhaz, son of the second Leo, who was the son-in-law of Ashot *curopalates*, gave him assistance.”

²¹ *Book of K'art'li* 258. For a dating see Settipani (2006) 458–61, Martin-Hisard (2000) 459–61 and Toumanoff (1956b).

²² See Suny (1994) 29–30 and Khroushkova (2006) 89–96.

²³ See for example Martin-Hisard (1981) 156 and Treadgold (1988) 321, dating the expedition against Abasgia in 831 and 840 respectively. Martin-Hisard (2000) 461, note 689 dates the campaign to 837, following the *communis opinio*.

suzerainty of the Byzantines.²⁴ On the other hand, there were many ways to recover influence in the area other than direct military intervention against the kingdom of the Abasgians. The alliance of the Byzantines with the Khazars since the beginning of Theophilos' reign (see Chapter 19) was perhaps not unrelated to the events we are considering here. In fact, the first king of Abasgia, Leo II, was the "offspring of the daughter of the king of the Khazars", as the Georgian chronicles tell us.²⁵ For the kingdom of the Abasgians there was every reason to be on good terms with their mighty Khazar neighbours, so that the Byzantines might have tried to reassert their influence in the area first through an alliance with the Khazars.

The activities of the Khurramites in the regions of Basean and Vanand, and even the campaign of Theophilos in the areas of Sper and Karin, could certainly be understood as pressure against the neighbouring Iberian Bagratids (see Map 3),²⁶ but it is also conceivable that there was some kind of understanding with the Georgian principalities which bordered all these areas against a common foe, such as the Armenian princes who campaigned with caliph Mu'tašim against the Byzantines in 838 (see Chapter 17.2) or the Muslim Caucasian emirates. In fact, Stephen of Taron says that the Khurramites were destroyed by the emir of Tiflis Iṣḥāq ibn Ismā'īl, a major opponent of the Georgian Bagratids. It does not matter whether the Khurramites were on their way back to the west when they were surprised and massacred in Vanand by the emir of Tiflis or their defeat took place when they attempted to cross the Caucasus to the north, towards Abasgia, or to the east, towards the territories held by the emir of Tiflis.²⁷ What matters is that they probably engaged in a war against the Muslim ruler of Tiflis who was expanding his power towards the Black Sea in direct confrontation with the Georgian principalities and the kingdom of the Abasgians. As a matter of fact, there are some passing through Vanand and crossing the Lesser Caucasus towards Tiflis.²⁸

It is therefore appealing to suppose that the expedition of the Khurramites was planned in support of the Iberian Bagratids, a supposition already advanced by modern historians.²⁹ It would have been a serious blow for the Byzantines if the emir of Tiflis had controlled Kolchis/Lazika, for the city of Trebizond, one of the most important urban centres of the empire, was directly affected by the events in the area and even assumed the role of see of the ecclesiastical province of Lazika

²⁴ Toumanoff (1956b) 75. See also Grégoire (1927–1928) for a letter supposedly sent by empress Theodora to the relatives of the Georgian martyr Constantine in 853.

²⁵ *Book of K'art'li* 259. Settipani (2006) 460–61 suggests that the Khazar wife of Constantine V was sister of Leo's II mother.

²⁶ See also Hewsens (2001) map 75.

²⁷ The province or region of Vanand lay between the possessions of the Georgian Bagratids and the principality of Simbat Ablabas (another Bagratid and son of Ashot I Msaker), who had his capital at Bargaran. It was therefore the natural route to enter the Lesser Caucasus from the south.

²⁸ Hewsens (2001) map 55.

²⁹ Grousset (1947) 354: "Bagarat avait sans doute cru que l'expédition byzantine de 837 le délivrerait de la menace que faisait peser sur lui l'émir Ishaq de Tiflis."

when this was annexed to the kingdom of the Abasgians.³⁰ It is not necessary to postulate a special link between the emperor Theophilos and Trebizond in order to explain the sending of an army to the region.³¹

A further problem in this reconstruction of the events is the location of the “village of Kachkak’ar” mentioned by Stephen Asoghik. No scholar has tried to identify this place in the account of Stephen, as far as I know.³² A mountain of this name (modern Koçkar) is located in the Pontic range to the east of Trebizond (3,937 m), certainly on the way to Georgia and Abasgia, but far away from Vanand, where the above-mentioned village was supposed to be, according to Stephen Asoghik. Moreover, the presence of the emir of Tiflis in the area near Trebizond must be completely excluded. Other possibilities could be explored, but they remain unreliable without complementary evidence.³³

Another point to be considered in connection with the “Abasgian” campaign mentioned by the Continuator is the *ἀὐθις* “again, anew” that introduces his account of the campaign. As I have already argued elsewhere,³⁴ this adverb may imply that this campaign was the second one the Byzantines conducted in that region. However, as no other previous campaign is mentioned in the Greek sources and the Continuator mentions an even later campaign led by Theoktistos during the reign of Michael III,³⁵ scholars have supposed that no third campaign could have taken place. This argument has even been reinforced since Huxley, based on the mention of an eclipse, dated the Abasgian expedition of Theoktistos³⁶ to 840 (and therefore to the reign of Theophilos).

³⁰ Martin-Hisard (1981) 155 and Khroushkova (2006) 89–90. For the role of the Laz and Tzan as mediators between Iberia and the Byzantine area of Pontic Trebizond see Bryer (1966–1967).

³¹ In a synaxarion of the archbishop Athanasios of Trebizond edited by Papadopoulos-Kerameus (1967) 139–41, mention is made on page 140 of a daughter “of the emperor Theodosios the small” (τοῦ βασιλέως τοῦ μικροῦ Θεοδοσίου) who was possessed by a demon. Athanasios travelled to Constantinople to practice the exorcism at the request of the emperor and his wife. As Athanasios is said to have been appointed archbishop by patriarch Methodios, Papadopoulos-Kerameus thought that the text should be corrected to “of the abominable emperor Theophilos” (τοῦ βασιλέως τοῦ μιαινοῦ Θεοφίλου). Martin-Hisard (1981) 156 took this emendation as evidence of a special relationship between the emperor Theophilos and Trebizond. For a seal of the Khurramite’s leader Theophobos found in Trebizond see Chapter 11.3, Figure 2.

³² Hübschman (1904) 438 interprets the ending as “stone”.

³³ Timothy Greenwood points out to me that Hewsens (2001) in map 91 registers two villages in the district of Kechror, to the south of Vanand, named Kechror and Tsarakar and very close to each other. The name Kachkaka’ar could have arisen as a false conflation of them. Both villages lie on a north–south route that leads to a mountain pass in the south and then proceeds eastwards to Dvin.

³⁴ Signes Codoñer (1995) 593 and 596.

³⁵ Th. Cont. IV.39 (203.2–7).

³⁶ Huxley (1989). See also Signes Codoñer (1995) 593–4 and 596–8.

However, we could find a reason for the Continuator not to mention a first campaign in Abasgia. In fact, the Continuator lists succinctly a series of upheavals and disasters during the reign of Theophilos that because of their annals-like nature were surely copied from a minor chronicle of the period.³⁷ These brief **Annales Theophili* probably also contained information about other events of the reign which perhaps turned out well for the emperor. Now, since the aim of the Continuator was to blacken the picture of the reign of Theophilos,³⁸ he could have singled out from the list only the events that set the emperor in an unfavourable light. Among them was undoubtedly the fiasco of the “second” Abasgian campaign we date to 837, but perhaps not a first one led by the Khurramites and perhaps to be dated to 835–836.³⁹ He then suppressed the mention of the first campaign from his narrative, but he copied the account of the second without much reworking, including the adverb ἄθις that pointed to the existence of a previous campaign in the same area.

If our supposition proves to be right, we might tentatively identify the campaign in Basean in 835–836, mentioned in §2 by Stephen Asoghik, with this first “Abasgian” expedition of the Khurramites. Indeed, Basean is near the Vanand region, which is also called “North Basean”, as we see in the index of the Hewsens atlas. It is also on the way to Tiflis. However, more evidence would be needed in order to accept this identification. The adverb ἄθις might have been used by the Continuator simply to introduce a new entry in a sequence of events, and does not necessarily imply a previous Abasgian campaign.

In any case, the emperor did not take part in any campaign at Basean and Vanand, for he is not connected with the actions of the Khurramites in the account of Stephen Asoghik. Probably his new Persian troops were better suited than a huge imperial army to advance further east into Armenian territory. Moreover, it would have been too risky for the emperor to force his way through the passes of the Lesser Caucasus towards the lands of the emir of Tiflis.

Therefore, a strategic alliance between Theophilos and the Iberian principalities, despite its likelihood, remains only hypothetical for there is no single positive piece of evidence in the sources confirming it.⁴⁰ The same is also valid for a

³⁷ Th. Cont. III.39 (137.1–22). See Signes Codoñer (1995) 594–6.

³⁸ Signes Codoñer (1995) 672–3 and *passim*.

³⁹ In this first campaign the Khurramites slaughtered the people of Gomadzor in the province of Basean. Timothy Greenwood suggests to me that it is possible that Gomadzor, literally “valley of Gom”, could be referring to Aksigoms, in Hewsens (2001) map 55, north-east of Theodosiopolis. For Gom (farmyard? flat and wooden area?) and Aksigoms see Hübschmann (1904) 382 and 396.

⁴⁰ As a curiosity we can refer to the fact that according to Th. Cont. III.26 (119.14–23) John the Grammarian, in order to contact Manuel during his exile in the caliphate, disguised himself as an Iberian mendicant monk on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As we saw in Chapter 5.4, this story probably relies on an oral epic source without much historical value. However, this detail is not to be discounted as further evidence pointing to a close relationship between Iberians and Byzantines.

possible alliance of the emperor with the Armenian Bagratids, although we know that the emperor campaigned in person in 835–836 in the area around Sper and Theodosiopolis, peopled by Armenians. We will consider now the evidence related to this campaign.

15.3 The Armenian Bagratids

In 836 Theophilos awarded to the ruler of the principality of Sper (a little buffer state at the frontier) the titles of patrikios and consul. Significantly, the ruler was another Bagratuni, this time the Armenian Ashot, son of Shapuh Bagratuni, the late brother of Ashot I Msaker, who had been appointed by the caliph prince of Armenia in 806 and greatly expanded his power in central Armenia until his death in 826. Two sons of Ashot I Msaker and accordingly cousins of Ashot consul of Sper ruled their father's territories during the reign of Theophilos: Bagarat Bagratuni controlled southern Taron, and his brother Simbat Ablabas the principality of Bagaran (see Map 3).⁴¹ The promotion of their cousin Ashot as prince of Sper was perhaps a calculated move on the part of Theophilos, designed to assuage the Armenian Bagratids.⁴² An alliance with the powerful sons of Ashot Msaker, and especially with Bagarat, who was recognized prince of the Armenians by the caliph some time after the death of his father, was undoubtedly only to the advantage of the Byzantines. Theophilos could have high hopes for the region, considering for example that Simbat Ablabas had in 833 led a coalition of forces against the Muslim governor of Dvin. Although the attack failed and Simbat even had dissident Muslim emirs as allies, the situation in the region was so unstable and changeable from day to day that any possibility was by then conceivable.⁴³

If such was Theophilos' hope, it remained unfulfilled, for Bagarat of Taron, who had been appointed prince of princes by the caliph, took the field against the emperor in 838 along with the Muslim troops led by Mu'tašim. We do not know the reasons why Armenian Bagratids sided with the caliph in 838, although they could be connected with the devastation of the Fourth Armenia by the imperial troops in 837, as we shall see in Chapter 16. It is not to be ruled out that the ambitions of the young emperor, the first Byzantine ruler to appear in the Armenian lands for many decades, were not precisely welcomed by the monophysite Armenians, who were diffident towards their orthodox fellow countrymen serving under the banner of the emperor. We must also take into account that the emperor may have approached the orthodox Iberians, as we argued above, although no positive evidence is available. However, it is also to be doubted that religious differences counted for very much at the time, for the majority of the Armenian lords were by

⁴¹ Laurent and Canard (1980) 163–4, 406, 465 note 18.

⁴² Grousset (1947) 354–355 and Toumanoff (1963) 323–4, note 81.

⁴³ See Laurent and Canard (1980) 136–7 for the changing fidelities of the two sons of Ashot Msaker and 382–9 for a short overview of some Muslim emirs linked to them.

then thoroughly used to the reality of Islamic government and were consistently loyal supporters of the caliph.

It is worth considering in this connection the possibility that the family of Alexios Mousele, son-in-law of Theophilos, could have had a special interest in Theodosiopolis, where the emperor's army appeared in 836. As I have already argued in Chapter 7.2, the *Krenitai* or *Krinitai*, to whom Alexios Mousele belonged, could in fact have been former inhabitants of the region of Karin/Theodosiopolis. As we saw, the inhabitants of Theodosiopolis were forced to leave their city by the emperor Constantine V during a campaign in the region. As they subsequently served in the ranks of the Byzantine army, this circumstance may explain Theophilos' interest in effectively controlling this city, which naturally meant imposing taxes on its new inhabitants (to a great extent Arabs) and perhaps repopulating it. In any case, the weight of the Armenian families at Theophilos' court must be a complementary factor for explaining the campaign, which was undoubtedly made possible by the many threats the Abbasid caliphate had to deal with after Ma'mūn's sudden death in 833.

15.4 A Tentative Chronology for the Campaigns of the Years 834–837

Stephen Asoghik mentions four campaigns in the passage dealt with above in section 15.1. We may surmise that the campaigns took place in chronological sequence, although no dates are provided for them. However, we have established that the earliest possible dating for the first campaign mentioned in §2 is 834 and that the last campaign referred to in §5 took place in 837.

As we have already argued, it appears strange that the expedition of 837 mentioned in §5 took place “in the same year” as the previous one led by the Khurramites, for this latter ended in failure and would accordingly have somewhat tarnished, if not cancelled, Theophilos' triumph. It does not make sense either that the Khurramites campaigned in Vanand while Theophilos was attacking Sozopetra and pillaging the Fourth Armenia. Moreover, as we will see in Chapter 16, the Khurramite troops actually accompanied the imperial army in the campaign against Sozopetra in 837. As this campaign was probably a long one, considering the number of cities and fortresses attacked by the imperial army, it probably started at the beginning of the spring, thus leaving no room for another expedition of the Khurramites earlier that year. How do we cope then with the reference of Stephen of Taron to the expedition of 837 as taking place “in the same year” as that of the Khurramites in Vanand?

We can of course put this reference down as an error. But perhaps we can find an explanation in the start date of the calendar year followed by Stephen of Taron. He uses the Armenian era, which started on 11 July 552 according to Grumel,⁴⁴ so that in §1 he dates the death of Michael II to the year 278, which began on 3

⁴⁴ Grumel (1958) 140–45. Mosshammer (2008) 424–32 seems also to favour this date.

May 829 and ended on 2 May 830, indeed correctly, for Michael actually died in October 829. As the Armenian solar calendar did not incorporate a leap year, the correspondence between it and the Julian calendar slowly changed every four years, so that 1 Nawasard, the first day of the year, fell on 1 May for the years 836–839 according to the chronological tables of Grumel.⁴⁵ If Theophilos departed for the east at the start of spring 837, that is to say, in March–April as we conjecture, then his campaign could have been dated to the very end of the Armenian year 285, which ended on 30 April 837. And then the preceding expedition of the Khurramites mentioned in §4 could have taken place in summer 836, “in the same year”, 285.

It would have been perhaps more logical to date Theophilos’ expedition of 837 to the year 286, beginning 1 May 837, for the campaign of the emperor stretched over several months, probably until the end of the summer. But as happened also with the caliphal campaigns (see Chapter 17 for the campaign of Amorion), the date of the emperor’s departure from the capital was usually recorded and perhaps used as a chronological reference. Nevertheless, we do not have evidence that Theophilos departed from Constantinople in March–April, nor even that he “penetrated Syria” before 1 Nawasard 286, so that this hypothesis cannot be corroborated.

There is however another possibility to date the Khurramite expedition mentioned in §4 to the year 836. It is more than likely that Stephen got his information about the campaigns of Theophilos from a Greek source, where the sequence was arranged according to the Byzantine calendar year, beginning always on 1 September. According to this calendar, a campaign of Theophilos during the spring–summer of 837 was considered to have taken place “in the same year” as a defeat of the Khurramites in Vanand, which happened to occur in September 836 and put a sad end to an expedition started in the area earlier in the summer. Stephen would then have copied the chronological sequence unchanged from the Greek source, without adapting it to the Armenian calendar year.

There are accordingly good reasons to think that the Khurramite expedition mentioned in §4 could not occur simultaneously with the campaign of Theophilos of 837 and must therefore be dated to the previous year, 836. If this was the case, then Theophilos’ campaign in Sper and Theodosiopolis mentioned in §3 would probably have taken place in the year before, 835. We would thus have the following tentative chronology of the Byzantine campaigns in the east for the years 834–837:

1. 834: The Khurramites campaign in the region of Basean, perhaps as allies of Bagarat Bagratuni. There they massacre many of the inhabitants of the town of Gomadzor.
2. 835: Theophilos enters Armenia from Chaldia, crossing the Pontic range. He takes many prisoners among the Armenian families, appoints Ashot

⁴⁵ Grumel (1958) 251.

- Bagratuni consul of Sper and forces the inhabitants of Theodosiopolis/Karin to pay tribute to the empire. After that, he returns to the empire.
3. 836: An imperial army under the command of Theophobos and Bardas, including Khurramite contingents, enters the Georgian principalities to help the curopalates Bagarat Bagratuni and his allied Abasgians in their fight against the Muslim emir of Tiflis, Iṣḥāq ibn Ismāʿīl. However, the emir of Tiflis defeats them in the region of Vanand, probably in September.
 4. 837: Theophilus enters Syria, takes Sozopetra and Arsamosata, and besieges Melitene. A triumph is held in Constantinople (see Chapter 16).

15.5 The Supposed Attack of the Melitenians in 835

In a chapter that deals with the beginning of the reign of Muʿtaṣim, Michael the Syrian compiles several short accounts about events of the years 833–835, covering fewer than two pages in Chabot’s translation. The last of these accounts refers to a military clash between the Melitenians and the Byzantines and the ensuing defeat of the emperor at the hands of the Arabs:

In this year, ʿUmar and his partisans, inhabitants of Melitene, entered the Roman land for plundering. emperor Theophilus encountered them and he defeated them at first. Then the Arabs [Ṭayyāyē] gathered again and prevailed this time over the Romans. The Romans turned their back to them. Many of them were killed and the emperor took flight with some. The Arabs [Ṭayyāyē] ran into the imperial encampment [φοσσότων] and plundered even his bed and his clothes. They filled their hands with his wealth.⁴⁶

Warren Treadgold gave credence to the chronological reference at the beginning of the passage and accordingly dated the military encounters described in this piece “in the same year” as the two previous short pieces copied by Michael the Syrian in this chapter, accordingly in 835.⁴⁷ The first of these two previous pieces is in fact expressly dated by Michael to the year 1146 of the Seleucian era, that is to say from 1 October 834 to 30 September 835, and briefly refers in three lines to a campaign of Iṣḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muṣʿab against the Madai rebels in the mountains. The following piece of two lines, preceding the final passage of the chapter, mentions without any dating that Afshīn was sent by Muʿtaṣim against

⁴⁶ Mich. Syr. 529, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 85. See Vest (2007) vol. 2, 633–4 for a German translation with a transliteration of the Syriac text. Vest notes that the last lines of the passage are difficult to read because the scribe compressed the writing at the end of the column dedicated to earthly events.

⁴⁷ Treadgold (1988) 286.

the Khurramites, an event that took place in June 835 according to Ṭabarī.⁴⁸ There seems to be no reason not to date the final piece of the chapter also to 835.

However, the information about these two encounters of Theophilos with the Melitenians is suspect for several reasons. To begin with, no other source mentions it. If it were a victory for Theophilos, this would come as no surprise, for there was no interest in reporting his victories after 842. In fact, only an antiquarian protocol from the time of Constantine VII (see Chapter 14.2) and a difficult passage from Stephen of Taron (see above in section 15.1) record Theophilos' victories, with the exception of the campaign of 837 (see Chapter 16) that triggered the massive campaign of Mu'taṣim against Amorion in 838. But Michael now mentions a defeat of Theophilos, and indeed a very significant one, for the imperial tent was plundered, with the imperial wardrobe, and the emperor barely escaped death with some of his men. It appears strange that no other source mentions this important defeat of the emperor at the hand of the Arabs, and especially no Arab historian. That the caliph did not take part in it does not appear to be enough reason for this silence.

A defeat of Theophilos in 835 on the eastern frontier does not fit well with the chronology of his campaigns suggested above, based on the passage of Stephen of Taron. If our conclusions are right, Theophilos was campaigning in Sper and Theodosiopolis in 835. Nothing is said of an encounter with the Melitenians during this campaign, which took place in the Armenian heartlands, and nor is any other campaign of Theophilos before 837 recorded by Stephen. Furthermore, the writing in 836 of a letter by the three Melkite patriarchs praising Theophilos for his victories (see Chapter 21.6) would not have been understandable if Theophilos had suffered a humiliating defeat in 835.

To the arguments *ex silentio* and the historical background, we must add some other considerations based on the structure of the chronicle of Michael the Syrian and his working methods.⁴⁹ As is already known, Michael quoted and excerpted his sources and compiled the material afterwards. His was a work in progress, in which he occasionally discovered new material pertaining to an earlier section but inserted it later out of its chronological order since it was too costly to rewrite what had already been completed. When needed, he even excused himself for these lapses.

There were also frequent duplications of the same events, which Michael failed to detect. This was undoubtedly the case with the reference to an attack against Sozopetra that Michael refers to at the beginning of the reign of Theophilos for it is a duplicate of the campaign of 837 described later in some more detail. We will find evidence supporting this in Chapter 16.1. A parallel case is the double mention of the rebel Thomas at two different points in the narrative of Michael the Syrian, as we argued in Chapter 13.1.

⁴⁸ Ṭabarī III.1170–1171, trans. Bosworth (1991) 14.

⁴⁹ For the remarks that follow see the overview of Weltecke (1997), esp. 19–30.

The supposed campaign of the Melitenians in 835 could be a further case of a misplaced or misdated excerpt.⁵⁰ The Melitenians were in fact defeated in 837 by Theophilos, although not exactly in “Roman land”, but in the Fourth Armenia, when the emperor was besieging Arsamosata, as we shall see in Chapter 16.1. The defeat of Theophilos in Anzes in 838, as we shall see in Chapter 17.2, almost cost the emperor his life, for, with a few men, he narrowly escaped death. Although no mention is made by the sources of a plundering of Theophilos’ bed and clothes in 838, it is clear that the emperor was forced to abandon his encampment in a hurry, so that the taking of his personal belongings by the Muslims can be assumed on this occasion. Curiously enough, the Melitenians also took part in the battle of Anzes under the command of Afshīn, who led further Muslim and Armenian contingents.⁵¹ It is even expressly told by Ṭabarī that the leader of the Melitenians, ‘Amr ibn ‘Ubaydallāh ibn al-Aqṭa’, seized substantial booty during the campaign of 838, although he refers only to slaves.⁵²

Therefore we find in the sequence of events in 837–838 a defeat of the Melitenians by Theophilos and a defeat of Theophilos by the Melitenians, exactly in the same order as in the passage of Michael the Syrian. The condensed narrative in Michael perhaps explains why the “gathering” of the Melitenians after their defeat by the Byzantines appears as an immediate move rather than part of a campaign that took place one year later. The fact that ‘Amr ibn ‘Ubaydallāh ibn al-Aqṭa’ is named as ‘Umar in the passage of Michael the Syrian, whereas he is ignored in the narrative of the events in 837, may perhaps point to a local Melitenian source for the passage copied by Michael, either a short chronicle or a popular song or poem. Concerning this last possibility, one must take into account that Aqṭa’ became an epic hero in Arabic literature.⁵³ He was also popular among Greeks. The Continuator reports that “people (οἱ πολλοί) called him Ambron (Ἀμβρον) with a small corruption of the letters,”⁵⁴ and it is perhaps no coincidence that the great-grandfather of Digenis and ancestor of his family is named Ἀμβρων in the epic poem.⁵⁵ Some evocative details of the narrative, like the seizure of the king’s bed and clothes, fit in well the context of an oral tradition. Interestingly, they also appear in a Latin narrative of the capture of Isaak Komnenos’ tent by the men of Richard I the Lionheart in 1191:

⁵⁰ Vest (2007) vol. 2, 633–4 suggests that the attack of the Melitenians in 835 as reported by Michael the Syrian could be the result of a “Falschdatierung” or even “eine Verdopplung einer der späten Razzien” of the Melitenians, but in the end he seems to accept the dating of Michael.

⁵¹ Th. Cont. III.31 (126.23–127.3) and Gen. III.13 (47.23–25).

⁵² Ṭabarī III.1259–1261, trans. Bosworth (1991) 124–5.

⁵³ See Canard (1932), (1935) and (1961) 170–71, Vest (2007) vol. 2, 661–4.

⁵⁴ Th. Cont. IV.16 (166.16–17).

⁵⁵ *Digenis Akrites* G.1.285 and G.4.37. See Jeffreys (1998) xxxvi and 387. Michael uses the Greek word φοσάτων in his narrative, which could perhaps point to a Greek source.

The people returned to the loot and they made off with much booty: arms, valuable silk garments, and even the emperor's tents, together with all that was in them, including gold and silver vessels, the emperor's bed with its choice appointments, and all his furnishings, his special helmets, breastplates, and swords.⁵⁶

It is tempting to think that the sack of Isaak Komnenos' tent left its imprint on the narrative of Michael the Syrian about the victory of Aqṭa' over Theophilos, for Michael was a contemporary of the events of the Third Crusade (his chronicle ends in 1199). But whatever the source was for the episode of the Melitenians' plundering of the emperor's encampment, it seems more than likely that Michael the Syrian found it undated among his sources. As he was not able to identify it with the campaign of 837, he inserted it in his narrative of the year 835, probably because he discovered no further information about Theophilos' movements during this year. The victory of the Melitenians over Theophilos in 835 also provided in his eyes supplementary grounds for the emperor's campaign against Sozopetra and Melitene in 837.

There is accordingly no defeat of Theophilos in 835 at the hands of the Melitenian troops. The events referred to by Michael the Syrian in the year 835 have probably to do with the emperor's campaign against Melitene in 837 and his ensuing defeat in Anzes in 838 with the participation of Melitenian contingents.

⁵⁶ *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi* II.34 in Stubbs (1864) 193–4. I take the translation from Brundage (1962).

Chapter 16

The Second Triumph of Theophilos in 837

16.1 Michael the Syrian on the Campaign of 837

Michael the Syrian preserves the fullest account of Theophilos' campaign of 837.¹ The chronicler gives as ultimate cause for the campaign the arrival of most of the Khurramite rebels, Naṣr included, at Byzantium, where they became Christians. With their help Theophilos felt confident enough to undertake a major campaign against the Arabs. He first sent messengers to the Great Armenia to exact a tribute, threatening invasion and destruction in case of a refusal. As the Armenians did not have troops at their disposal, they complied and paid. As a consequence, Theophilos thought that everything would happen according to his wishes.

It is difficult to assess whether this short account is a faint echo of the campaigns led by Theophilos and the Khurramites in Armenia in the years before 837 that we considered in previous chapters. However, it appears that Theophilos first tried his hand at the Armenians and only afterwards ventured on a large-scale invasion of Arab territory. This comes next in the account of Michael the Syrian. I translate the passage from the French version by Chabot:

In the summer of 1148 [of the Seleucid era, i.e. 837] Theophilos marched anew against Zubaṭra. When the barbarians took it, they slaughtered without mercy the Christians and the Jews. Their ferocity went so far that they raped and disembowelled the women.

After they had sacked and burnt down the city, they went to the region of Melitene, to which they set fire and where they also took prisoners. They sent absolutely all of the prisoners to the Land of the Romans.

They went over to Hanaziṭ and to the region of Arsamosata. They laid siege to this city. The Ṭaiyayê [i.e., the Arabs] who were inside, and as they had heard about the slaughter in Zubaṭra, were seized by fright and compelled either to pay tribute to the Romans or to leave the city and take flight, for no rescue was sent to them as the Persians were busy with the war against Bābak and were angry with Abū Ishāq, who had levied taxes upon them.

¹ Mich. Syr. 531–3, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 88–90.

The hatred of the Ṭaiyayê against us the other Christians increased because of the expedition of the Romans and they would have killed us had they not been told that the Christians of Zubaṭra had been sacked by the Romans.

In particular the Christians of Edessa were suffering because of a bold man of the same Edessa, called Shamuna, who went to serve the Romans and encouraged them to make the Ṭaiyayê perish.

While the Romans laid siege to Arsamosata, one group of the Arabs Rabī'ayē [an Arab tribe]² and the people of Melitene gathered to fight them. The Ṭaiyayê were defeated and four thousand died among them.

The Romans took and burnt down Arsamosata and went over to the region of Armenia, taking prisoners and setting fire. They left soon and pitched their camp near Melitene. Theophilus ordered its inhabitants: "If you do not open the gates to me and do not accept a deal for your life, I will make you all perish along with your city as I did with Zubaṭra." Then the judge and the people of note came out to meet him and held an interview with him using flattering words. They asked him for some delay to give him hostages and guaranteed that they would not make any incursion into his country. When they gave him presents and the Roman prisoners who were held in their city, the emperor parted for he was afraid of being reached by the army of the Ṭaiyayê.

The king Abū Ishāq, puzzled by what the Romans had done, sent 'Ujayf [ibn 'Anbasa] against them, with four thousand men. The Romans had the upper hand, destroying his army, and he took flight with a few men. He soon assembled a new army and marched forward in wintertime. He took some prisoners, cattle and horses and turned back. When they approached our country, with hostile intent, they barred all routes and pillaged every person they met.

Modern historians have followed the account of Michael the Syrian practically without changes when trying to describe the sequence of events.³ Both the geographical background and the accurate details given speak for the likelihood of the account. There are however some points to consider.

First of all, there is the fact that Michael the Syrian says that Theophilus marched "anew" against Sozopetra, as if this were the second expedition of the emperor against the city. No other source refers to a previous campaign of Theophilus in the area, but Michael has a duplicate of the account misplaced some

² A nomadic tribe originating from Bahrein. See Mich. Syr. 540, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 106–7 for their activities as brigands against the caliph.

³ See for example Treadgold (1988) 293–4, who follows closely the account of Michael except for some lesser detail taken from Mas'ūdī. Ibid. 440, note 401 a short comment upon the main sources for the event.

pages before, exactly at the beginning of the reign of Theophilos.⁴ This parallel account refers again to the reasons that prompted the emperor to wage a campaign in the east and to his laying siege to and taking Sozopetra, but does not mention the further development of the military expedition in Arsamosata, Armenia and Melitene, for immediately afterwards Michael mentions the desertion of Manuel the Armenian to the Arabs as taking place “in the following year”.

This first account provides some minor details that are absent from the second. Thus Theophilos is encouraged to attack the Arabs not only because the Khurramites joined his army, but also because the Bulgarians had submitted to him.⁵ It is also said that the Byzantines took Sozopetra by placing scaling ladders on the walls and that they massacred men, women and children. No word is said about Jews now,⁶ although the raping of the women, taken naked into captivity, is also mentioned. Finally, it is said that the Arabs rebuilt the city after the Byzantines left.

It appears that Michael read two different versions of the same event in two different sources, which probably made common use of a third one for the siege of Sozopetra.⁷ Despite the remarkable similarity of the reports, Michael seems to believe that Theophilos did indeed take the city of Sozopetra twice, perhaps because the two versions of its siege and taking by the Byzantines were handed down by his sources in connection with different events and, most important, with a different dating: the first version referred to the beginning of the reign of Theophilos whereas the second provided an exact date, the year 1148, that is to say, 837. Nevertheless, it is clear that the second dating is the correct one, as all the other sources date the siege of Sozopetra to the caliphate of Mu‘taṣim and more exactly to the years 837–838. The presence of the Khurramites indicates that the siege could not have taken place before their arrival in Byzantium after 833, as we saw in Chapter 10.1. The reference to a siege of Sozopetra at the very beginning of Theophilos’ reign must surely originate from the lack of a date for the first report, a circumstance that prompted its author to begin his narrative about Theophilos with this very siege, for he perhaps knew that Theophilos led a victorious campaign in the east (the one of 831) in the first years of his reign

⁴ Mich. Syr. 522, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 73–4. Vest (2007) vol. 2, 621–2 follows Michael closely and concludes mistakenly that a first attack on Sozopetra could have taken place in 829–830 or even in 825–826, during the reign of Michael II. He considers the political context in his argumentation but does not appreciate the close similarity between the two accounts, as we shall subsequently see.

⁵ This mention of the pacification of Bulgaria may explain why Mas‘ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold*, vol. 7, 133–4, trans. Vasiliev (1935) vol. 1, 330, speaks of Bulgarians and other peoples, but not Khurramites, as taking part in the expedition of Theophilos against Sozopetra. It is in fact possible that the presence of the Bulgarians was deduced from the simple statement of the source that the emperor had previously sealed an alliance with them to put an end to the war in the Balkans.

⁶ For the presence of Jews see Vest (2007) vol. 2, 638.

⁷ One of the sources was probably Dionysios of Tell Mahrē himself, whom the caliph Ma‘mūn met in Kaysūm on his way to Damascus. See Vest (2007) vol. 2, 625–32.

and he did not have any better source for it. But whatever the reason the author of the first version had for putting the report of the siege there, Michael borrowed it unchanged for his chronicle and did not recognize its affiliation with the second report dated precisely to 837.

A second aspect to consider in the report of Michael the Syrian is the dating of the event to the summer of 1148 of the Seleucian era, which corresponds to the summer of 837. The Arab sources date the expedition instead in the year 223 of the Hegira (3 December 837–22 November 838) and accordingly in the summer of 838.⁸ Again, as we saw above in the case of the expedition of Ma'mūn of 832 in Chapter 14.3, the Arab sources are not trustworthy, as they connect the expedition of Theophilos against Sozopetra and Melitene with the retaliatory campaign of Mu'taṣim against Amorion that undoubtedly took place in 838. Accordingly, the Arab sources include both campaigns under the year 223 of the Hegira in order not to break the narrative. Evidence of the chronological problems the Arab authors had with this campaign is provided by Ṭabarī himself, who explicitly says that the date of the departure of Mu'taṣim for his campaign against Amorion is given differently in the sources: "It has been said that he departed thither from Sāmarrā in 224 [23 November 838 to 11 November 839], or alternatively, in 222 [14 December 836 to 2 December 837], after he had killed Bābak."⁹ To these two years HA 223 [3 December 837 to 22 November 838] must of course be added the year when al Mu'taṣim actually set off for Byzantium! Ṭabarī includes the report of the campaign in this very year.

We must therefore approach with caution the fact that Ṭabarī dates "on Monday, the second of Jumādā I"¹⁰ the sending by Mu'taṣim of troops under the command of 'Ujayf to relieve the inhabitants of Sozopetra. The 2nd of Jumādā I of HA 223 (the year under which Ṭabarī includes this information) corresponds to 1 April 838, which was indeed a Monday, so that the coincidence would in fact support this dating. However, April 838 is too late for the relief expedition of 'Ujayf, if we admit that Theophilos' campaign took place in the summer of 837. But if we put the 2nd of Jumādā I in Hegira 222, it again makes no sense, for it corresponds to 12 April 837, which was not a Monday but a Thursday, and presupposes that the emperor had already left Constantinople in the winter for a long campaign in the east, against the testimony of Michael the Syrian.¹¹ The solution to the puzzle is afforded this time by Mas'ūdī, who dates "on Monday, the second of Jumādā I" not the departure of the relief expedition of 'Ujayf but of the expedition of

⁸ Ṭabarī III.1234, trans. Bosworth (1991) 93; Mas'ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold*, vol. 7, 133–4, trans. Vasiliev (1935) vol. 1, 330; Ya'qūbī, vol. 2, 580, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 274.

⁹ Ṭabarī III.1236, trans. Bosworth (1991) 97.

¹⁰ Ṭabarī III.1236, trans. Bosworth (1991) 96.

¹¹ Rekaya (1974) 56–7, note 5, discusses the problem but comes to the conclusion that the expedition of 'Ujayf sent by Mu'taṣim dates from 222 and set off from Baghdad 12 April 837.

the caliph himself against Amorion!¹² This is again a warning about the troubled chronology of the events in Ṭabarī but, more important, implies that Theophilos could not have campaigned in 838 in the area of Melitene and Arsamosata, for it was in spring of that year that the caliph, after sending first the expedition of ‘Ujayf, finally succeeded in putting together a massive army to retaliate against the emperor for his previous attacks.

It is also important to stress that the caliph’s delay in preparing a retaliatory campaign against Theophilos is duly explained in the sources by the fact that the main goal for Mu‘taṣim in 837 was to suppress the rebellion of the Khurramites of Bābak: only when the resistance of the last Khurramites in Azerbaijan was crushed could the caliph start thinking of a massive campaign against the Byzantines. The parallel with the campaign of Ma’mūn in 832 is blatantly obvious, for the caliph, as we demonstrated in Chapter 14.3 and 14.5, was then prevented by the events in Egypt from taking immediately to the battlefield against Byzantium to retaliate for the previous campaign of Theophilos in 831.

Moreover, Theophilos probably decided to launch his attack on the eastern frontier knowing of the military pressure the Khurramites exerted on the northern border of the caliphate. Whether Theophilos tried to come to Bābak’s aid at a moment when the Khurramite leader and Byzantium’s ally was in a desperate situation in front of the Arab armies, or whether he simply tried to take advantage of a suitable circumstance, will perhaps never be known. But the fact remains that the open front of the caliphate against the Khurramites certainly favoured Theophilos’ offensive in 837. It seems on the contrary less likely that Bābak, as Ṭabarī claims, tried to engage the emperor in a campaign just to divert the caliphal troops who were fighting him:

It has been mentioned that the reason for that [Theophilos’ campaign in 837] was the position into which Bābak had fallen, because of his being driven into a tight corner by Afshīn, his reduction to the verge of destruction, and Afshīn’s continuous pressure on him. When he was close to final perdition and became convinced that his own resources were now too weak to combat Afshīn, he wrote to the king of the Byzantines, Theophilos, son of Michael, son of George, informing him that the king of the Arabs had sent his armies and warriors against him, even to the point of sending his tailor (he meant Ja‘far ibn Dīnār) and his cook (he meant Aytākh), and that no one remained behind him at his headquarters. [He accordingly told him], “If you want to march out against him, know that there is no one in your way who will prevent you.” Bābak sent that

¹² Mas‘ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold*, vol. 7, 135, trans. Vasiliev (1935) vol. 1, 331. See the critical remarks to Rekaya about this point in Treadgold (1988) 440, note 401. The fact that Mas‘ūdī does not mention the expedition of ‘Ujayf does not undermine his reliability, for he expressly says that his account of Mu‘taṣim’s reign in the *Meadows* is but a summary of his other historical works: Mas‘ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold*, vol. 7, 144–5, see Vasiliev (1935) vol. 1, 328.

communication of his to the king of the Byzantines in the hope that, if he could induce the king to mount an attack, some of the difficulties that he himself was at that point enduring would be dispelled by Mu‘tasim having to transfer some of the armies then facing Bābak to combat the king of the Byzantines and by his attention being thus deflected from Bābak.¹³

In any case, the evidence provided by Ṭabarī and Michael the Syrian warrant the connection between the caliphal offensive against Bābak and Theophilos’ campaign. As the crushing of Bābak is to be dated in 837, so too is the offensive of the emperor.

The campaign of Theophilos in 837 is also characterized by the ferocity of the imperial troops, although Michael makes the “barbarians”, that is to say, the Khurramites, directly responsible for slaughtering the population of Sozopetra, not only Jews but also Christians, and for the raping of its women. The cruelty of the Khurramites towards the civilian population is in accordance with the information Stephen Asoghik provides about a previous campaign of the Khurramites in Western Armenia, where they are said, as we saw in the previous section, to have attacked the town Gomadzor and “massacred many with the sword”. Ṭabarī refers for his part to the fact that the Byzantines took over a thousand prisoners in the cities they seized and “made an example of those Muslim men who fell into their hands, putting out their eyes with hot irons and cutting off their ears and noses”.¹⁴ Although the Khurramites are not expressly held responsible here for this savagery, some lines later Ṭabarī highlights their crucial role in the Byzantine army during this campaign, making the connection between them and the punishment inflicted on the population self-evident for the readers.¹⁵ The arrival of refugees from Sozopetra as far as Sāmarrā, as also stated by Ṭabarī in the same passage, is perhaps further proof of the fierceness of the fight, where old quarrels may have played a role.¹⁶ According to Michael the Syrian, as we saw above, the Christians also suffered at the hands of the Muslims, who wanted to retaliate for the misfortunes of the Arabs in Sozopetra. The situation in Edessa must have been especially strained, for one citizen in the city apparently joined the Byzantines with the purpose of attacking the Arabs. This information, unparalleled by other sources, is very important and suggests that Theophilos could even have envisaged an advance further south, into the Osrhoene, of which Edessa was the capital.

The Greek sources make no reference to all these religious and ethnic tensions revealed by the oriental sources, which offer a first-hand account of the impact of the Byzantine campaign over the mixed population of the area. This is not a secondary issue, for it is perhaps the sudden emergence of these tensions that

¹³ Ṭabarī III.1234–1235, trans. Bosworth (1991) 94.

¹⁴ Ṭabarī III.1234, trans. Bosworth (1991) 93.

¹⁵ Ṭabarī III.1235, trans. Bosworth (1991) 95.

¹⁶ See Mas‘ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold*, vol. 7, 134, trans. Vasiliev (1935) vol. 1, 331: “Terror spread everywhere”.



Map 4 Scheme of the campaign of Theophilos in the east in 837 according to Michael the Syrian

alienated Byzantine sympathies in the area and may explain that the caliph, despite the important presence of Armenians in the imperial army and at the court (as we saw in Chapters 3–8), could rely on the Armenians in the campaign he launched in 838 against the Byzantine mainland in Anatolia.

That Theophilos' army numbered 100,000 men, as Ṭabarī states (he says: “or even more than that”!) must be ruled out,¹⁷ but it had to be in any case a very large army for the standards of the time.¹⁸ Otherwise, Theophilos would not have dared to go as far east as Arsamosata after plundering Sozopetra. He also left behind the city of Melitene. If we follow his movements in Map 4 according to the report

¹⁷ Ṭabarī III.1235, trans. Bosworth (1991) 95.

¹⁸ See Chapter 14.2 for consideration of the average size of the armies of the time, with bibliography.

of Michael the Syrian, we immediately detect the danger to which Theophilos exposed his troops, for contingents coming from the region of Melitene or even the Kommagene could have barred his way back to imperial territory. In fact, Michael the Syrian says that Arabs of the Rabi'a tribe with the help of the inhabitants of Melitene followed the army of Theophilos to the east and joined in the fight against the Byzantines when they were laying siege to Arsamosata. Although the Byzantines were then in a difficult situation, as they lay between the Arab forces coming from the west and the inhabitants of Arsamosata – who could make a sally against the besiegers at any time – they managed to defeat the Rabi'a and kill four thousand of their men, if we give credence to the probably inflated numbers given by Michael the Syrian. That the Byzantines took the risk of such a confrontation far from Byzantine territory can be explained only because they felt confident enough in their numbers to face any local army.

Back in imperial territory after the taking of Arsamosata, the Byzantines even turned again to the southwest to besiege Melitene, which they had bypassed when they first marched south to take Sozopetra. Only after taking hostages from the Melitenians, Michael the Syrian says, did the Byzantines leave for their country, because Theophilos “was afraid of being reached by the army of the Ṭaiyayê”, that is to say, a regular army sent by the caliph to encounter the invaders. In fact, some caliphal troops, commanded by ‘Ujayf and consisting of perhaps four thousand men, joined in the fight with the Byzantines and were again defeated, most of the Arabs dying in the battle. ‘Ujayf saved his life, but by the time he could assemble another army, it was already winter, as Michael the Syrian informs us. ‘Ujayf could only take some prisoners and provisions and pillage the country, most probably to get supplies for his troops. This is further proof of the isolation of the caliphal troops in the region that they were trying to defend against the invaders.

It seems therefore that the Byzantine army found no serious rival in the area. Theophilos could take two cities (indeed even a higher number if we consider the text of Samuel of Asoghik which we will analyse in Chapter 16.2), and defeat two armies in a pitched battle, one consisting of Arab local forces and the other a force hastily sent by the caliph to relieve the people of Sozopetra. Only the prospect of a major force coming from Baghdad, which seemed increasingly possible following Bābak's defeat, as well as the impending winter, finally moved the victorious army to retreat to its headquarters.

16.2 Armenian Chroniclers on the Campaign of 837

Another point to be considered in the reconstruction of events during this campaign is the reason for the apparently strange move of Theophilos towards distant Arsamosata, which lay outside the main route towards the caliphate to the south of Melitene. The Arab sources note the taking of Melitene and Sozopetra but say nothing about Arsamosata. This cannot be advanced as proof that the city was not besieged and taken by Theophilos, since the Arab authors are naturally

less concerned about events in the Armenian mainland. This is not the case, as we have seen, for Michael the Syrian and related sources.¹⁹ The Armenian histories of Stephen Asoghik of Taron and Samuel of Ani provide considerable information about the movements of Theophilos in the area of Arsamosata and the Fourth Armenia, which put the strategy of the emperor into a clearer context. However, as we saw in Chapter 15.1, the identification of the places mentioned is rendered difficult by the corruption of the names.

Let us consider first the text of Stephen Asoghik in an English translation Timothy Greenwood kindly provided. It is §5 of the passage quoted in full in Chapter 15.1:

And in the same year, Theophilos penetrated Syria and took the city of Urbeli and fought with the Arabs at Almulat [Arsamosata] and triumphed. This man during his march to the eastern part of the province of Armenia, took Tsmu the Armenian fortress, Asaghin, Metskert and Aghberd in the district of Gegham; and he rendered Khozan and Fourth Armenia deserted by man and beast. Stephen Asoghik II.6.

As a sample of the errors contained in the passage we can perhaps consider first the mention of *Urbeli* as a city conquered by Theophilos in Syria. The name is reminiscent of the well-known city of Arbela in Assyria, also spelt Erbil, Arbail, Urbel or Irbil.²⁰ However, it should be discounted that Theophilos campaigned in the heart of the Abbasid caliphate, so we must assume a corruption of the name. As we have already said, Marquart supposed that the passage of Stephen lay at the end of a quaternio and was therefore very damaged. According to him, a scribe amended many of the names of the places found in this passage as he copied the text. Being unable to read them correctly, he often supplied missing letters and modified to a great extent the original wording. So Marquart thinks that *Urp[eli]* was a substitute for *[Z]urp[ata]* that was a usual Armenian rendering of Zupatra or Sozopetra, the city actually taken by Theophilos in 837.²¹ Although some letters must be changed to explain the error, we cannot find a better alternative, as Sozopetra was the only Syrian city ever taken by Theophilos. The possibility that the archetype of our text was damaged, as the ink faded away, should be seriously considered.

This false reading of the Syrian Sozopetra is already a warning against taking too literally the names of the following Armenian cities, especially when these names are difficult to identify. This caution is reinforced when look at Samuel of Ani, who copied in the margin of his chronological tables a short version of the note

¹⁹ See Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography* 148, trans. Budge (1932) vol. 1, 135–6 and *Chronicle of 1234*, vol. 2, 22, trans. Abouna and Fiey (1974) 15.

²⁰ See Hewsen (2001) s.v. “Erbil” in index p. 318.

²¹ Marquart (1930) 48, note 2. As Timothy Greenwood comments to me, the fact that Samuel of Ani gets this name right is also strong evidence for a corruption of the original after the late twelfth century, for Samuel was certainly working from Stephen of Taron.

Stephen Asoghik transmitted. Samuel, who inserts this passage next to the reign of Theophilos, lists a series of Armenian cities taken by the emperor that differs considerably from those mentioned by Stephen. Samuel's text runs as follows:

Theophilos entered Syria and seized the city of Zupata. He went also to Armenia and took the fortress of Paghin, Metskert, Ankh in the district of Degis, and Khozan.²²

Only the cities of Metskert and Khozan appear in the two texts. As both are easily identified and lie near to each other to the north of Arsamosata (see Map 5), we have every reason to suppose that they were actually taken by Theophilos. But what can we say of the rest of the cities mentioned in the two lists? Although the differences seem difficult to explain if we consider that both writers based their work on the same source, there is however a diffuse similarity in the wording that made Marquart propose a corrected version of the more detailed text of Asoghik taking into consideration the variants recorded by Samuel of Ani. His corrected version of the text of Asoghik, which has not been questioned so far, runs as follows:

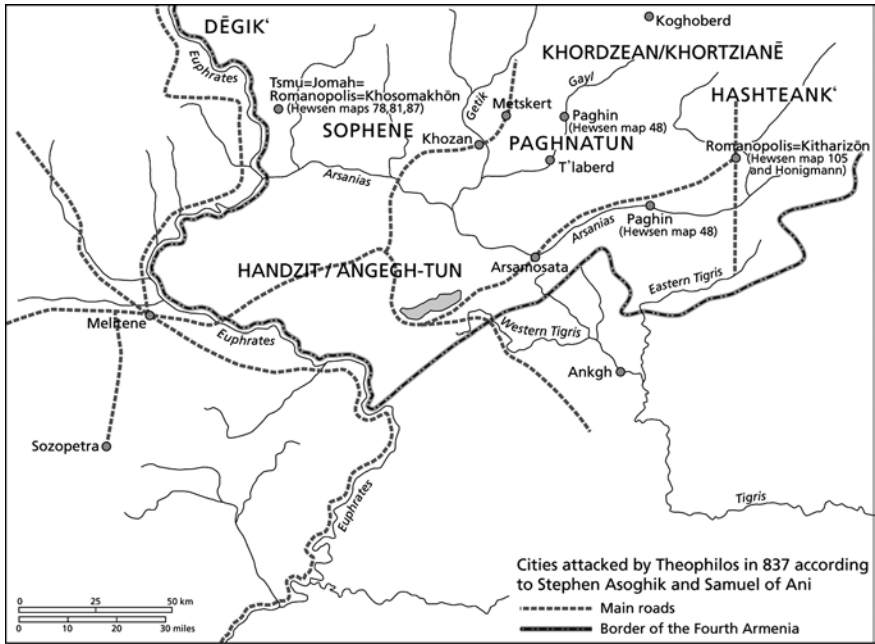
5. The same year Theophilos entered Syria and took the city of Zurpata. He fought with the Arabs at Ashmoushat and vanquished them. This man during his march to the eastern part of the boundaries of Armenia took Tsmu, the fortress of the Armenians, Paghin, Metskert and Ankh in the province of Degis, and Khozan, and rendered the Fourth Armenia into a desert without men and beasts.²³

The emendation of the unknown Asaghin mentioned in Stephen for the well-known city of Paghin recorded by Samuel can be admitted. Indeed, Paghin lay quite near to Arsamosata, although in Hewsens's atlas we find two different locations, as we see in Map 5.²⁴ The first places Paghin to the east of Arsamosata and, like this city, lying on the south bank of the river Arsanias that flowed westwards to the Euphrates. This circumstance would explain why Paghin could have been one of the first targets of Theophilos in his campaign. But as the city is mentioned after Tsmu, which may be located further east (see below), I prefer the second location of the city to the north of Arsamosata, next to Metskert and Khozan in the region of Paghnatun to which it gives its name.

²² Timothy Greenwood checked the present translation for me. See also the German translation of Marquart (1930) 45, where the event is dated to the year 828. The French translation of Brosset (1876) 423 is somewhat different: "Il va en Syrie et prend la ville de Zoupatra; en Arménie, il prend la forteresse de Paghin, Medzkert, Dégis dans le canton d'Ancli et Khozan." The rendering "Dégis dans le canton d'Ancli" must be a mistake by the French scholar, as Marquart does not mention any correction on his part of the original wording of the Armenian text, which he copies at 45, note 2.

²³ I adapt into English the translation by Marquart (1930) 48–9.

²⁴ Hewsens (2001) map 48.



Map 5 Campaign of Theophilus in the east in 837 according to the Armenian sources

More difficult to accept is Marquart's substitution of "Ankhg in the province of Degis", as it appeared in Samuel, for "Aghberd in the province of Gegham", the wording we have in Stephen. The province of DĒgik' (Τεκῆς-Digisene) lay on the left bank of the Euphrates where it begins to flow southwards after passing Tephrike. The river served at this point as the Byzantine eastern frontier. Accordingly, the city of Ankhg should have been in this area, but instead it is located to the southeast of Arsamosata, close to the point where the western and eastern Tigris merge and accordingly to the south of the Arsaniās river.²⁵ Moreover, the province of DĒgik' was not the point where Theophilus crossed the frontier. Indeed, the emperor supposedly entered Armenian territory through the bridge to the east of Melitene, for Michael the Syrian says that the Roman army, after pillaging the region around Melitene, went to the Handzit and entered the region of Arsamosata.²⁶ The region of Handzit/Ĥanazīt or Angegh-tun lies in fact between Arsamosata and Melitene and constitutes the natural link between these two territories, whereas the district of DĒgik' could have been raided by the emperor only on his way back to the empire. However, if this last holds true, what

²⁵ Marquart (1930) 49–50. See Hewsens (2001) map 48.

²⁶ Mich. Syr. 532, trans. Chabot (1905) vol. 3, 89. The same reference in the *Chronicle of 1234*, vol. 2, 22, trans. Abouna and Fiey (1974) 15.

is the sense of the mention of the province Dēgik' between the cities of Metskert and Khozan that lay between Dēgik' and Arsamosata?²⁷ Finally, if Theophilos proceeded to the northwestern region of Dēgik' after taking Khozan, it would be difficult to explain why he later turned to the south to attack Melitene, whereas if Khozan were the last city taken in the Fourth Armenia, he could have easily followed the route through Handzit on his way back home, as we can see in Map 5. In that case, he would have again come across Melitene on the way.

I think accordingly that Marquart's conjecture on this point is not very likely. Certainly we have no information about a city called Aghberd, and the province of Gegham, where it should be placed, lies by lake Sevan in the heart of Armenia, a place Theophilos surely never reached. Thus the text of Stephen needs to be amended at this point, but I am not sure, despite Marquart's arguments, that Samuel of Ani preserved the original wording. I think that the name Aghberd in Stephen could be a corruption of T'laberd, which lay, according to Hewsens' atlas,²⁸ south of Paghin on the river Miuss (the other Gayl, today called Peri-su) and very close to the two other cities listed later, Metskert and Khozan (see Map 5). As T'laberd, Paghin and Metzker all lay in Paghnatun, we should expect that the region named after them was precisely this one, and not Gegham or Dēgik'. The fact that Khozan, which lay near to Metskert, is cited after the mention of the province can then be easily explained considering that it lay to the west bank of the river Getik, which probably marked the frontier between Paghnatun in the east and the Sophene (Cop'k' Shahuni) in the west.²⁹ So we must suppose that the mention of Gegham was substituted for a previous mention of the region of Paghnatun, however the error could have arisen.

The identity of the fortress of Tsmu is also not clear. Marquart admitted that he did not know where Tsmu lay, but then tried to locate it in the region of Khordzean, near Koghoberd, to the north of Arsamosata.³⁰ However, his reasoning is very complex and, being based on several premises, has been discounted by the specialists.³¹ The fortress of Tsmu is, however, located very precisely in the

²⁷ Perhaps we should have expected a mention of the region of Angegh-tun in our Armenian sources, for Theophilos crossed it when he marched against Arsamosata. Could the mention of the province of *Gegham* have been due to a misreading of *Angegh-tun*? However, there is no hint in our sources that a single city in the Handzit was taken by Theophilos in this raid across the region.

²⁸ Hewsens (2001) map 48.

²⁹ Bartikian (1994) 127–8 considers in his translation that the reference to the province of Gegham refers not just to the city of Aghberd, but also to all of the previously cited cities.

³⁰ Marquart (1930) 50–53.

³¹ Marquart identifies our Tsmu with a Greek bishopric called Τζιμενοῦ which is associated with the region of Κορτζινή (Khordzean) and the bishopric of Κελτζινή in a list of bishoprics of the tenth century edited by Darrouzès (1981) as Notitia 8, lines 122–3 (see also *ibid.* Notitia 11, lines 141–2). But as there was a place called Τζουμνά located in the Derjan region, to the north of the high course of the Euphrates, near to Κελτζινή, Marquart must also prove that Τζιμενοῦ had nothing to do with it. Darrouzès (1981) 81, note 2, 83,

region of Dēgik' in two maps of the Hewsens atlas.³² There the place is also given the names of Jomah and Khosomakhōn,³³ and it is also identified with the Greek Romanoupolis.³⁴ Unfortunately, the location of Romanoupolis seems not to be quite clear in Hewsens's atlas, for we find two alternative locations for it, both quite near to Arsamosata, in a map depicting the ecclesiastical provinces of Byzantium in the eleventh century.³⁵ As we do not know what Hewsens's basis was for such locations, one is tempted to suppose that he somehow identified Tsmu with the other cities, whose location is also disputed.

Nevertheless, there is some discussion about the location of Romanoupolis, a city already mentioned by Constantine VII near the region of Handzit.³⁶ It is significant that Honigmann placed this city in a strategic crossing between the road leading from Theodosiopolis in the north to Amida in the south and the road that followed the course of the river Arsanias from Arsamosata to Mush.³⁷ This is exactly the point where Hewsens places it among other ecclesiastical sees of the area in the eleventh century. Whether this Romanoupolis has something to do with our Tsmu is a question I am not able to answer, but its location east of Arsamosata and its strategic value made Romanoupolis a first target in Theophilos' expedition to the east of Arsamosata. It is curious that Stephen Asoghik calls Tsmu "the fortress of the Armenians". Actually this precision seems utterly superfluous in a list of Armenian strongholds.³⁸ It looks like an explanation destined to identify the place for the readers. Could we suppose that the chronicle which Asoghik used as a basis for this account was a Greek one and that he mistook Ἀρμενίων πόλις ("the city of the Armenians") for Ῥωμαίουπολις ("the city of the Romans")?³⁹ This could point to a kind of Greek *Annales* of the reign of Theophilos as a source for the Armenian historians and could be the reason for the corruptions and misreadings in the names of the places we have detected so far. However, we would need more evidence for that conjecture.⁴⁰

91 and 122, note 2 and Honigmann (1935) 198–200 had rejected Marquart's conjectures convincingly as they proved that the connection between Τζήμενοῦ and Κορτζινή / Κελετζινή in the *Notitiae episcopatum* can only be a mistake.

³² Hewsens (2001) maps 81 and 87.

³³ See also Hewsens (2001) map 78.

³⁴ Hewsens (2001) map 87.

³⁵ Hewsens (2001) map 105.

³⁶ *De administrando imperio*, ch. 50.

³⁷ See especially "Mentions de Romanopolis" in Honigmann (1961) 87–98.

³⁸ Unless, as Timothy Greenwood suggests to me, the precision indicated that the fortress was held by Armenians rather than Arabs, Persians or Kurds.

³⁹ It has been considered that this city was named Romanoupolis after Romanos I Lakapenos took control of the area in the beginning of the tenth century, but I wonder whether this city could have had this name before. Alternatively, the Greek source used could be later than the reign of Romanos I.

⁴⁰ According to Timothy Greenwood, the rendering of Khurramite as Horomid may also point to an original Greek source. However, as we already commented in Chapter

One must also take into consideration the possibility that the reference to the “fortress of the Armenians” is misplaced in the present text and that it originally referred not only to Tsmu but to all the fortresses mentioned in the text, for all the places named are more strongholds than cities. In that case, we would have no connection between Tsmu and Romanoupolis in the text, thus making its location in the province of Dēgik’ more likely. But we would then need to explain how Theophilos could have turned aside to the Dēgik’ region and later proceeded again to the south, to besiege Melitene. As we said above, this makes no sense. However, if Tsmu is correctly placed in Dēgik’, then we must surmise a corruption of the text, perhaps the result of a hasty summary of the source. We argued along these lines in Chapter 15.1, when commenting upon the campaigns mentioned before during Theophilos’ reign.

A last point must be considered. The Armenian historian wrote at the end of his account: “Theophilos rendered Khozan and the Fourth Armenia deserted by men and beast”. The Byzantine province of Fourth Armenia (renamed Justiniana by Maurice in 591) comprised the districts of Khortziane (Khordzean), Astaunitis, Palines (Pagnatun), Balabitene (Arsamosata), Sophene, Anzitene (Handzit), Digisene (Dēgik’) and Gaurene,⁴¹ and included the areas we have considered until now in our commentary of Stephen’s passage. However, it seems that the reference to the Fourth Armenia is linked only with Khozan. In this case the term Fourth Armenia should be understood as referring only to Sophene, which was the heart of the whole region.

If our conjectures are right, we could restore the text of Stephen Asoghik as follows:

And in the same year, Theophilos penetrated Syria and took the city of Zupatra and fought with the Arabs at Arsamosata and triumphed. This man, during his march to the eastern part of the province of Armenia, took Tsmu the Armenian fortress [or the Armenian fortresses of Tsmu etc.?), Paghin, Metskert and T’laberd in the district of Pagnatun; and he rendered Khozan and Fourth Armenia deserted by man and beast. Stephen Asoghik II.6.

If this was the original rendering of the text (and other possibilities cannot be excluded!), then Theophilos proceeded to the northwest after taking Arsamosata and conquered several cities in Pagnatun (Paghin, T’laberd and Metskert) and lastly Khozan in Sophene. Only the location of Tsmu in Dēgik’ does not make much sense, for it lay far away from the route followed by the emperor.

15, Stephen may not have consulted directly this supposed Greek source but known of it through the mediation of the lost history of Shapuh Bagratuni, who probably used it.

⁴¹ Hewsen (2001) map 77. This map is an exact and thorough rendering of the administrative division of Armenia in the seventh century drawn by the Armenian mathematician and scientist Ananias of Shirak.



Figure 4 Follis with triumphant Theophilos, holding labarum with cross in right hand, globe cruciger in left hand. Found in the Lower City Enclosure of Amorion, 2006. Courtesy of the Amorium Excavations Project.

A corruption could be surmised, one perhaps affecting the precision ‘fortress of the Armenians’, which seems superfluous.

The apparent devastation Theophilos left behind in the area contrasts surprisingly with the more conciliatory attitude the emperor adopted in his previous campaign in 835–836 in the region of Upper Armenia, where Sper and Theodosiopolis lay. The massacre of the Khurramites in Vanand early in 837 could explain the ferocity of the imperial troops in the capture of Sozopetra and also the destruction they sowed in the Fourth Armenia, which was probably more connected with the Armenian Bagratids ruling in Taron and Bagaran. In any case, this act of retaliation and this display of might was going to cost Theophilos the participation of Bagarat of Taron, appointed prince of princes by the caliph, in the campaign that Mu‘tašim undertook against Amorion the following year, as we shall subsequently see.

No matter which route was followed by Theophilos in 837, the campaign was a major success for him. If we also take into account the seizure of Sozopetra and the defeat of the Muslim troops of Melitene, the whole campaign of 837 could be

accordingly identified with the second triumph of Theophilos' reign mentioned in the Greek protocol edited by Haldon (see Chapter 14.2).

More difficult to assess is whether this military expedition was the same as that the Continuator mentions as having taken place “at Charsianon” (κατὰ τὸ Χαρσιανόν). The campaign was also followed by a triumph.⁴² We favoured such an identification in Chapter 14.2, but with great caution, for no clear conclusion can be drawn from the sources.

⁴² Th. Cont. III.23 (114.17–22).

Chapter 17

Theophilos' Defeat at Anzes and the Capture of Amorion in 838

17.1 A Retaliatory Campaign for the Plundering of Sozopetra?

According to all the sources, the defeat of the Muslim troops by Theophilos during the campaign of 837 infuriated Mu‘taṣim, who immediately prepared for a retaliatory expedition against Byzantium. The surrender of the last Khurramite rebels in Azerbaijan culminating in the execution of their leader Bābak had finally given the caliph a free hand to undertake a massive campaign in Anatolia. Accordingly, the Arab troops entered Byzantine territory in June 838, divided into two contingents through the passes of Adata and Tarsus.

The Byzantine sources explain the campaign of Mu‘taṣim against Amorion as a retaliatory act for the taking and plundering of Sozopetra, which they present as the caliph's native city. So, the Continuator says that Theophilos took in 837, besides two other cities, “Sozopetra itself, which was the native city of the caliph” (αὐτὴν τὴν Σωζόπετραν πατρίδα τυγχάνουσας τοῦ ἀμεραμουνῆ).¹ Genesis is even more explicit, for he informs us that Theophilos proceeded in 837 “towards the native city itself of the then-ruling caliph, which is called Sozopetra” (αὐτῇ τῇ πατρίδι ... τοῦ τότε κρατοῦντος ἀμεραμουνῆ, ἥτις Σωζόπετρα προσηγόρευται)² and again (in a second version of the same events) that the emperor took “Sozopetra, the city where the caliph was born” (Σωζόπετραν πόλιν τὴν μαιευσαμένην τὸν ἀμεραμουνῆ).³ As the Continuator combines into a single narrative two different reports about the same events, whereas Genesis does not,⁴ we can therefore conclude that Genesis used two different sources about the taking of Sozopetra and that both mentioned it as the native city of the caliph.

The Logothete seems to draw from a further source, for he adds some details not mentioned by the Continuator or Genesis. In fact, he refers to the taking of “Zapetron and Samosatou, a mighty city that then flourished in wealth because of the caliph being from there” (τὴν Ζάπετρον καὶ τὸ Σαμοσάτον, πλούτῳ κομῶν καὶ δυνάμει τότε διὰ τὸν ἀμεραμουνῆ ἐκεῖθεν εἶναι).⁵ The chronicler now mentions Sozopetra in a form closer to the one used in Semitic languages (Arabic

¹ Th. Cont. III.29 (124.11–12).

² Gen. III.11 (45.47–49).

³ Gen. III.13 (47.3).

⁴ Signes Codoñer (1995) 553–7.

⁵ Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 23 (223.158–159).

Zibaṭra, Syriac Zubaṭra), albeit also attested in Greek writers.⁶ More important, he also mentions Samosata as the second city taken by the emperor, an indication that is lacking in the Continuator and Genesis.⁷ This reference may appear as an error for Arsamosata, to which the Arab, Syriac and Armenian sources refer independently of each other, as we saw in Chapter 16 when dealing with the campaign of 837. The problem is that the syntax of the phrase seems to make this city (and not Zapetra) the place where the caliph was born and this makes no sense if the Logothete was referring to the Armenian Arsamosata. However, the Logothete may be alluding to Samosata, the ancient capital of the Kommagene, which was not only more important than nearby Sozopetra (and accordingly better known to our chronicler), but also the administrative see of the region. The Logothete could have mentioned Samosata merely in order to make it clear to readers to which region Zapetra belonged. That the Logothete did not refer to Arsamosata is apparently corroborated by the fact that he does not mention Melitene either, a city no oriental source fails to record when reporting Theophilos' campaign of 837.

Whatever the case, it is clear that Sozopetra (or the surrounding area)⁸ was considered by Greek historians to be the native city of caliph al-Mu'taṣim. However, nowhere in the Arab sources is it stated that Mu'taṣim was born in Sozopetra, a circumstance that has pushed scholars to think that the Greek authors made Sozopetra the native city of Mu'taṣim just to provide a parallel for the taking of Amorion in 838, for Amorion was in fact the birthplace of the reigning dynasty founded by Michael II the Amorian, Theophilos' father.⁹ This explanation is not entirely satisfactory. Certainly the more important city of Melitene was not actually taken by the emperor and Arsamosata lay further away from the area of interest for Muslim historians, so that Sozopetra was the only one of the three major cities attacked in 837 which remained free to be assigned the role of native city of the caliph, if one city should be punished for that by a Byzantine attack. But was it really conceivable that Byzantine propaganda could have concocted the idea that Sozopetra was the caliph's native city just to provide a parallel for the taking of Amorion?

⁶ Th. Cont. V.39 (268.11 line 3 in Ševčenko [2011]) = Skyl., *Basileios I*, 18 (136.23)

⁷ The Logothete uses the singular Σαμόσατον instead of the most usual plural Σαμόσατα.

⁸ The Continuator also has the caliph refer to Sozopetra as his πατρίς in the following passages: ἐκ τῆς πατρίδος αὐτοῦ Th. Cont. III.29 (124.13–14); ἐπὶ τῇ καταλήψει τε καὶ πορθήσει τῆς πατρίδος αὐτοῦ ibid. III.30 (125.16–17); ἐπὶ τῇ τῆς πατρίδος αἰσχρῆ ibid. III.30 (125.22–126.1); τὴν τῆς πατρίδος αὐτοῦ ἄλωσιν τε καὶ πόρθησιν ibid. III.33 (129.19–20). The Continuator also uses the word πατρίς for referring to Amorion when he says that two Arabic contingents converged “against the *patris* of the emperor” (κατὰ τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως πατρίδα) Th. Cont. III.33 (129.13). On a previous occasion, however, the Continuator uses the expression ἡ θρεψαμένη for referring to Amorion as the birthplace of Michael II (Th. Cont. II.3 [42.7]). In three other cases πατρίς appears in the Continuator as a reference to regions or countries (Armenia for Leo V, Paphlagonia for Theodora), but not to cities (Th. Cont. I.1 [6.4], I.1 [6.10–11] and III.5 [89.15–16]).

⁹ Vasiliev (1935) 140, note 1 and Treadgold (1988) 440, note 401.

Mu'taṣim was born in 794, according to Ṭabarī, in the Khuld Palace of Baghdad.¹⁰ His mother was a Turkic concubine of his father Harūn al-Rashīd. She is said to have come from Sogdiana, although she could have been born in Kūfa. Her father was apparently resident in Baghdad.¹¹ No connection is therefore provided between Sozopetra and the maternal family of Mu'taṣim.

However, the possibility remains that some of Mu'taṣim's relatives had established themselves in Sozopetra. This is what one of the hagiographies written for the 42 martyrs of Amorion seems to imply. There it is said that Theophilos took "illustrious cities of the Agarenes, where the *family* of the then-ruler of the Ismaelites was living" (περιφανεῖς πόλεις τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν, ἔνθα καὶ τὸ τοῦ κρατοῦντος τότε τῶν Ἰσμαηλιτῶν κατοικούν γένος).¹² Although the word γένος is certainly ambiguous (it could apply as well to the race or nation of the Ismaelites), its connection with the ruler of the Ismaelites, that is to say the caliph, is unmistakable here, so that some kind of relationship between Mu'taṣim's family and the area ravaged by Theophilos in 837 seems to be alluded to here. Curiously enough, the expression τοῦ κρατοῦντος τότε τῶν Ἰσμαηλιτῶν reminds us of Genesios' τοῦ τότε κρατοῦντος ἀμεραμουνῆ.¹³

A story reported by later Arabic sources may perhaps lend some support to this interpretation. According to this story, a

Hashemite woman, who fell captive in the hands of the Rum [i.e. during Theophilos' campaign of 837 against Sozopetra], shouted: "Woe is me, Mu'taṣim", and the caliph, sitting in audience on his throne, answered her: "Here I am, here I am." He got up at once and shouted out in his castle: "A trumpet call, a trumpet call." Then he mounted his horse, tying behind his saddle shackles, an iron ploughshare and a haversack with provisions ...

and departed for Amorion.¹⁴ Nothing is said about the origin and kinship of the woman with Mu'taṣim, although her call for help was immediately attended by the caliph and appears as one of the main reasons for his retaliatory campaign. The story was apparently known to older historians, for Ṭabarī reports that the fleeing refugees from Sozopetra reached Sāmarrā with the news of the capture of the city and its inhabitants. When the caliph was informed, he immediately made a call for arms and mounted his horse with the aforementioned objects attached behind his saddle.¹⁵ The difference is that no specific woman is mentioned among the prisoners of Sozopetra. Moreover, Ṭabarī adds that the caliph finally departed

¹⁰ Ṭabarī III.1324, trans. Bosworth (1991) 209.

¹¹ Ṭabarī III.1329, trans. Bosworth (1991) 216.

¹² *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Δ, 40.26–27.

¹³ Gen. III.11 (45.47).

¹⁴ Ibn al-Athīr VI.480. See also Ibn al-Ṭīqtaqā 316–17, trans. Whitting (1977) 229 and the *Book of the Sources* 390 as well as Bosworth (1991) 96, note 270.

¹⁵ Ṭabarī III.1235, trans. Bosworth (1991) 95–6.

for Amorion only after all arrangements had been completed, perhaps because the historian knew that it was only in 838 that Mu‘taṣim set off for Byzantium.

It thus appears that Ṭabarī suppressed the reference to the Hashemite woman from his source. He found it either inconvenient, for it discredited the Arabs that a Hashemite woman had been captured, or nonsensical, for the caliph could obviously not have heard her from such a distance. However, the woman’s call for help from a distance certainly made a strong impression on the caliph. Although the sources do not specify why the Abbasids should have considered her particular case so important, we may surmise that it was because she was a Hashemite, for the Abbasids considered themselves representatives of this family, connected with the prophet. They claimed descent from ‘Abbās son of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib and grandson of Hāshim. ‘Abbās had been paternal uncle of Muhammad and brother of Abū Ṭālib, who had taken care of the orphan Muhammad and married his son ‘Alī to Fatima. Accordingly, the Abbasids “cultivated the idea that the family [of the prophet] consisted of the descendants of Hāshim, thus including the ‘Alids and ‘Abbasids but excluding the Umayyads”.¹⁶

Therefore the emphasis on the Hashemite status of the woman, who must have been a noble lady of some importance, appears clearly as an indication of her relation to the Abbasids and therefore to Mu‘taṣim, who surely felt obliged to come to help his (distant) relative. A more explicit and detailed version of the story has been preserved in the Arab epic of *Dhāt al-Himma*, where the lady is even given a name. Although this is obviously a literary work that freely recreates the past, its account fits in well with our interpretation. According to the summary of the passage made by Lyons, when Mu‘taṣim is busy with the building of Sāmarrā, one of the spies of his minister ‘Abd al-Wahhāb arrives “and tells him of a Hashemite girl called Zainab, whom he has seen treated as a slave in ‘Ammūriya, and who had called out that *she was related to the caliph*” (italics mine). We are further told that Zainab was captured at Mayyāfāriqīn by a certain Kūshānūsh and “imprisoned in a dungeon when she had refused to become a Christian”. She then converted the mother of her master, but his sister told him of this and he therefore tried to sell her. “Mu‘taṣim, on being told of this, marches against ‘Ammūriya”.¹⁷

We can therefore hypothesize that among the prisoners taken by Theophilos in Sozopetra prominent members of the Hashemite family related to the caliph were found. The twisting of the facts in the oral and epic traditions may explain why the Byzantines referred to Sozopetra as the native city of the caliph. Arab historical sources understandably silenced the episode, although some of them preserved a faint echo of events.

Contemporary beliefs about Sozopetra have consequences for assessing the aims and targets of the Arab campaign against Amorion in 838. As we shall see, every detail in the expedition was carefully planned, but, if we trust the Greek sources, the Arabs did not conceal that their target was Amorion, the fatherland

¹⁶ Kennedy (1986) 125.

¹⁷ Lyons (1995) vol. 3, 460.

of the reigning emperor. The Continuator, for example, writes that the caliph “ordered and proclaimed everywhere that men of all ages gathered together from Palestine and Nether Libya should inscribe *Amorion* on their shields, alluding with boldness to his campaign against it”.¹⁸ Genesios repeats the same information for he says that the caliph “ordered that every standard-bearer should inscribe his charge with the word *Amorion*”.¹⁹ Moreover, the Continuator (but not Genesios) and the Logothete say that when Theophilos was at Dorylaion, he was informed of the caliph’s intention to attack Amorion.²⁰ We might consider that the caliph’s announcement of his military plans was a serious strategic error, for the Byzantines could use the previous knowledge of the movements of the enemy to organize an adequate military response on the field: in fact, Theophilos seems to have sent fresh troops to Amorion when he heard of Mu‘tašim’s plans. Obviously this did not matter in the end, since we know that the Arabs attained their target and took and sacked Amorion. But were the Arabs so confident of their own force as to minimize the disadvantages such a public proclamation of their targets could cause them? Or was there some propagandistic aim involved? And, lastly and most important, why should Mu‘tašim have taken such an interest in Amorion?

As we saw, when Ṭabarī records that the caliph regarded the sack of Sozopetra as a great calamity, he does not mention any special link between Mu‘tašim and the city.²¹ No Arab writer mentioned Amorion as Theophilos’ birthplace either, as one might reasonably expect, since Arab sources obviously stressed the importance of taking the city. Ṭabarī says that when Mu‘tašim decided to campaign against Byzantium, he asked first for the place in the Byzantine lands that was most impregnable and securely fortified. His advisors mentioned Amorion and thus he set off against it.²² Further on, Ṭabarī informs us that Mu‘tašim planned that the two contingents of his army should come together in Ankyra, which was also a main target of the expedition. Then he adds: “there was nothing greater in the Byzantine lands upon which he had fixed his intentions than these two towns [Ankyra and Amorion] or any worthier goal for which he was aiming”.²³ This reference to Ankyra along with Amorion indicates that it was the strategic importance of the two cities that made of them a self-evident military objective. This, however, does not exclude the possibility that the caliph could have chosen Amorion as a target because of the symbolic value of the city for the ruling dynasty or as retaliation for the capture of members of the Hashemite family in Sozopetra in 837

¹⁸ Th. Cont. III.30 (125.17–21): ὡς πανταχοῦ θεσπίσαι τε καὶ κηρῶσαι πᾶσαν ἡλικίαν ἐκ Παλαιστίνης τε καὶ τῆς κάτω Λιβύης συναθροισμένην ἐπὶ ταῖς ἀσπίσιν αὐτῶν ἐγγράμμαι «Ἀμόριον» τὴν κατ’ αὐτοῦ διάβασιν μετὰ θρασύτητος αἰνιττόμενος.

¹⁹ Gen. III.11 (45.53–55): θεσμοθετεῖ παντὶ τῷ τὸ φλάμμουρον περιφέροντι γραφῆ ἔνδηλον τὴν τοῦ Ἀμορίου συζήτησιν.

²⁰ Th. Cont. III.30 (126.1–15) and Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 32 (226.225–228).

²¹ Ṭabarī III.1235, trans. Bosworth (1991) 95.

²² Ṭabarī III.1236, trans. Bosworth (1991) 97.

²³ Ṭabarī III.1237, trans. Bosworth (1991) 99.

as well. Obviously Amorion's strategic and economic importance was probably a determinant for the caliph's choice, but we must not disregard the importance of symbols. The Byzantine authors (or their oral sources) undoubtedly simplified the facts when they made the caliph attack Amorion in retaliation for the seizure of his native city, but their rhetorical presentation of the events was perhaps not so far from the propagandistic version spread by some Arab sources.

In any case, there is no doubt about the massive character of the campaign. Ṭabarī says that Mu'taṣim equipped himself "in a manner that no previous caliph had ever done in regard to weapons, military supplies, implements, leather water troughs for the animals, mules, beasts of burden for carrying water, goatskins for water, iron tools, and naphtha". Certainly the number of men taking part in the expedition, given by Mas'ūdī as between 200,000 and 500,000 soldiers, is untenable,²⁴ and even the more moderate estimate of Michael the Syrian (80,000 soldiers plus 30,000 merchants and dealers) is to be approached with the utmost caution.²⁵ But it must have been in any case a very large expedition for the standards of the time. The references to a general levy of troops among the population of Palestine and Egypt, mentioned by the Continuator and Genesios, fits well with this idea.²⁶ The caliph accordingly did not need to put the name of Amorion on the shields of his soldiers to make the emperor fear for the fate of his native city. This is what a hagiography of the Byzantine martyrs of Amorion actually suggests. This version, which is very favourable towards Theophilos, has the following account of the events:

As the leader of the abominable Arabs envied this city and wanted to take it, since he had previously suffered also terrible losses through the great autokrator Theophilos, who was then the ruling emperor of the Romans, a noble man in every respect and strenuously active in many occasions, for he [i.e. the caliph] was ravaged in his own country many times and had been sacked, forced to abandon many cities and taken as captive, he plans thus in turn to inflict also a similar damage on him and sets off in campaign full of fury against this city, reuniting a multitude of nations and drawing behind him barbarians of rough voices, peoples of confused and slow tongues, to speak in a prophetic way, from which no number exists (ὄν ἀριθμὸς οὐκ ἔστιν), but even carrying with him every kind of equipments of engines for sieges (μηχανημάτων καὶ ἐλεπόλεων

²⁴ Mas'ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold* 135–6, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 331. See however Vasiliev (1935) 146.

²⁵ Kennedy (2001) 97–99 considers that 100,000 salaried troops were maintained by the Abbasid state at this time. See also Chapter 14.2 for the average size of armies at the time, with bibliographical references.

²⁶ Th. Cont. III.30 (125.17–20) and Gen. III.13 (47.5). The references of the Continuator in the edition of Bekker (1838) to Babylon and Koele Syria as places where the recruitment took place are not in the manuscript of the work and were added from Skylitzes by François Combefis, the first editor of the text.

σκεύη παντοῖα), by which a city is taken and plundered. While the barbarian prepared and equipped himself against the city, the emperor, learning of the plot (αἰσθανόμενος τῆς ἐπιβουλῆς), made ready the means he had at hand for providing (the defence). And, assembling all the army under his command, he sends to the city those he judged could rival the barbarians and fight them undismayed. These blessed happened to be among the first officials of the whole army.²⁷

This version not only confirms the importance of the army assembled by Mu‘taṣim, but also specifies that among the military supplies and implements mentioned by Ṭabarī there were engines for storming cities, or at least the materials for building them (this explains perhaps the “iron tools” referred to by the Arab chronicler).

When such a big army crossed the Byzantine frontier, the emperor could not but imagine that some attack on an important target in western Anatolia was envisaged. And Amorion was at the time perhaps the only major city of Anatolia, as made evident by recent excavations in the area. It was not only provided with a massive circuit of walls covering more than 50 hectares but also acted as a centre for the processing of agricultural produce, functioned as a commercial entrepôt and manufactured finished goods.²⁸ It is perhaps not without reason that Ṭabarī says that except for Amorion and Ankyra “there was nothing greater in the Byzantine lands upon which he had fixed his intentions”.²⁹ Ibn Khurradādhbih considered Amorion the only city in the district of the Anatolikoi and mentioned that its wall was defended by 44 towers.³⁰ Michael the Syrian reports even that when the caliph entered Amorion he “admired the beautiful structure of the temples and the palaces” and mentions a population of 4,000 males.³¹

Mas‘ūdī reports that, after taking Amorion, Mu‘taṣim wanted to march against Constantinople. His plan was to reach the Bosphoros and storm the city by land and sea. It was apparently only an impending danger (meaning the usurpation of ‘Abbās) that prevented him from doing so.³² This boasting seems unrealistic and, as we shall see below, it does not tally with the account of the retreat given by Ṭabarī, for there reference is made to the continuing threat represented by the Byzantines even after the taking of Amorion. Again, as we saw above in Chapter 14.7 when dealing with the invasion of Ma’mūn in 833, Arab sources are not to be taken too seriously in these cases, for either political propaganda or literary

²⁷ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. B, 11.21–36.

²⁸ See Lightfoot and Lightfoot (2007) 17–20 and 45–6 and Lightfoot (2007) 286. For a detailed bibliography on Amorion see the official web page of the Amorium Excavations Project: <http://www.amoriumexcavations.org/Publications.htm>.

²⁹ Ṭabarī III.1237, trans. Bosworth (1991) 99.

³⁰ Ibn Khurradādhbih 107–8 (trans. 79–80).

³¹ Mich. Syr. 537, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 99–100.

³² Mas‘ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold* 136, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 332. See Chapter 18.1.

embellishment here played a role in presenting Constantinople as the ultimate target of the invaders.³³

Accordingly, the importance of Amorion explains why Theophilos sent reinforcements to the city under the command of leading figures of the Byzantine army, as the hagiographical text also expressly says. This point is confirmed by other hagiographies of the martyrs of Amorion.³⁴ We do not know which contingents were first sent by Theophilos to reinforce Amorion, although the first man in command was undoubtedly Aetios, the strategos of the Anatolikoi, whose capital Amorion was.³⁵ When the city was finally taken by the Arabs, among the defenders there figured high-ranking officers like the patrician Theophilos,³⁶ a member of the Melissenos family (probably strategos),³⁷ the protospatarios Theodore Krateros (perhaps strategos of the Boukellarion),³⁸ the droungarios (perhaps of the watch, for he was patrician) Constantine Baboutzikos (Theodora's brother-in-law),³⁹ and an officer named Bassoos (of unknown rank).⁴⁰ We do not know whether Theophilos sent some of them to Amorion before or after his first encounter with the Arabs at the battle of Anzes.⁴¹ In any case, there is every reason to suppose that Theophilos reacted as soon as he could to protect Amorion when he realized that the city was the main objective of the Arab troops.

³³ In the accounts of the *Dhāt al-Himma*, a bulky frontier epic reflecting events of the eighth and ninth centuries, Constantinople was taken many times. See Lyons (1995) vol. 2, 151–211 and vol. 3, 301–504 for a summary of the work. We reproduce here the summary made by Lyons (*ibid.*, vol. 3, 423) of a passage referring to Mu'tašim's preparations for a campaign against Constantinople: "He [Mu'tašim] now sends a letter to Malatya in which he says that he intends to attack Constantinople, take it as the seat of his empire and crucify 'Uqba [a traitor] there, but in a private message to 'Amr he says that this is a ruse. He then goes to Khurasan where he collects an army of a million men, including the king of the Turks who has four hundred thousand followers."

³⁴ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Δ, 42.4–8 says that Amorion was the second city of the empire and that Theophilos sent there "the high-ranking officers of the Romans" (τοὺς τῶν Ῥωμαίων πρωτάρχους) to fortify and secure it (εἰς ὀχύρωσιν καὶ ἀσφάλειαν) against the Arabs. This last indication can be connected with information provided by Ṭabarī III.1245, trans. Bosworth (1991) 108, about the orders Theophilos gave to repair the walls of Amorion that had collapsed because of heavy rainstorms. The walls were badly repaired, probably because of lack of time, a circumstance that paved the way to the taking of the city by the Arabs. This suggests that the decision to repair the walls was taken in haste when notice of the Arab invasion reached the emperor. However, for Ṭabarī it is the negligence of the governor of Amorion that explains why the city walls were not repaired in a timely manner.

³⁵ *PmbZ* #108–109 and *PBE* s.vv. "Aetios 2, 4".

³⁶ *PmbZ* #8211 and *PBE* s.v. "Theophilos 6".

³⁷ *PmbZ* #4952, 8211 and *PBE* s.vv. "Melissenos 1, 2".

³⁸ *PmbZ* #7679 and *PBE* s.v. "Theodoros 67".

³⁹ *PmbZ* #3932 and *PBE* s.v. "Konstantinos 30".

⁴⁰ *PmbZ* #982 and *PBE* s.v. "Bassoos 1".

⁴¹ See Signes Codoñer (1995) 560–61. See Treadgold (1988) note 408 for an identification of the posts held by all these persons.

17.2 The Route Towards Amorion

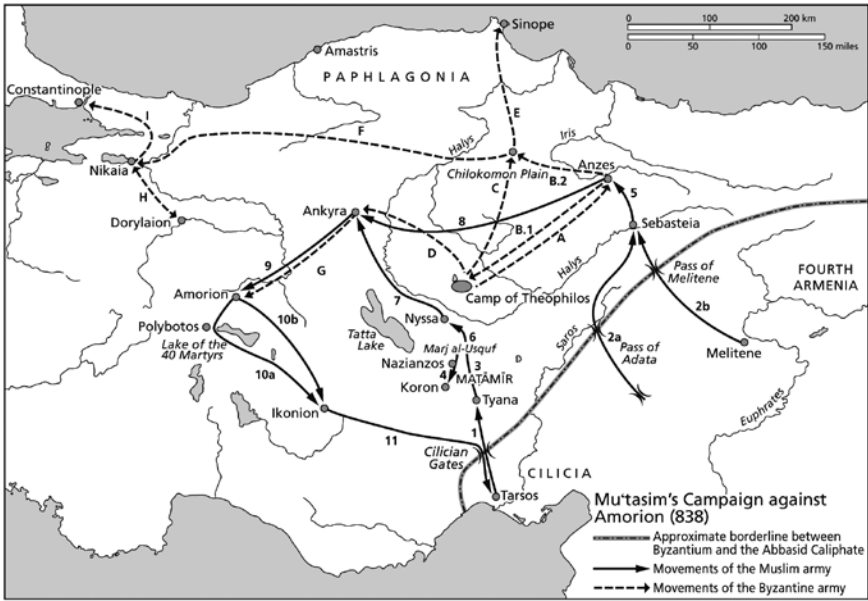
There were many roads leading to Amorion and Ankyra from the east, so that even if the final target of Mu'taṣim was known to Theophilos, the emperor would not be able to anticipate the routes that the armies of the caliph would follow. The strategy accordingly played an important role in the development of the war. Fortunately, Ṭabarī offers a very long and detailed account of the campaign, full of minor details and written with a narrative talent, from which the reader catches a very vivid glimpse of the feelings pervading the caliph's army on its advance through Byzantine Anatolia.⁴² The events are always told from the point of view of a witness who took part in the campaign as a member of the caliph's column (which entered Byzantium through the pass of Tarsos), probably a person close to the Turkish commander Ashnās.⁴³ What happened to the other contingent led by Afshīn, which entered Byzantium through the pass of Adata, is told in Ṭabarī through the testimony of other persons, but is also very accurate. However, as Afshīn's troops were the only ones that effectively fought the imperial troops, the Greek sources provide supplementary information about the encounter with the Muslims as seen from the Byzantine side and especially about the role the Persians and Manuel the Armenian played in events. A thorough analysis of the account of this fascinating text (one of the best narratives of a military campaign in the period) being not at place here, we will merely outline the main stages of the confrontation with the aid of Map 6, where the approximate routes followed by the different armies are drafted.

The main contingent of the Arab army was with Mu'taṣim and numbered 50,000 men, if we trust Michael the Syrian. The commander of this army was Abū Ja'far Ashnās, a Turkish general who later became governor of Jazīra, Syria and Egypt. He led the vanguard of the troops, followed by the main contingent of the caliph at a distance of a two-day march. Ṭabarī details the different cities taken by this contingent as he proceeded to the northwest after crossing the pass of Tarsos towards the end of June 838 (Map 6, route 1). When the caliph was in the region of the Maṭāmīr (subterranean cities) beyond Tyana, he dispatched a letter to the vanguard of Ashnās, who had advanced until Marj al-Uṣqf, "the bishop's meadow", a plateau between Nazianzos and Nyssa (Map 6, route 3).⁴⁴ In this letter

⁴² Ṭabarī III.1234–1256, trans. Bosworth (1991) 93–121. Vasiliev (1935) 144–77 has the best modern description of the campaign, based mainly on Ṭabarī. Ṭabarī's source for this campaign is probably Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (819–893), whose *Book of Baghdad*, containing a comprehensive history of the Abbasids until the year 879, is unfortunately lost except for book 6 dealing with the years 819–833 of al-Ma'mūn's reign. As the account of these years in Ibn Ṭayfūr was copied by Ṭabarī with minor changes, it seems likely that Ṭabarī also used Ibn Ṭayfūr for his narrative of the Amorion campaign. For the importance of Ibn Ṭayfūr see now Toorawa (2005). A detailed commentary of the route followed by Mu'taṣim in 838 can be found in Bury (1909).

⁴³ Kennedy (2001) 133.

⁴⁴ For the position of Marj al-Uṣqf, see Bury (1909) 121–12, Vasiliev (1935) 149, note 3 and 412, Hild and Restle (1981) 229 and Haldon (2001) 87–90.



Map 6 Mu'tasim's campaign against Amorion in 838

the caliph warned him that the emperor was waiting for them on the other side of the river Halys.⁴⁵ The caliph wanted to join in battle with the emperor after fording the river and ordered Ashnās first to wait and then to seek out a man from the Byzantines whom he could question about the plans of the emperor. Ashnās dispatched a contingent of 200 cavalrymen under the command of 'Amr al-Farghānī with this purpose to the area around the fortress of Koron (Qurra), which was the administrative capital of the district (thema) of Cappadocia (Map 6, route 4).⁴⁶ The Arabs rightly supposed that the commander of Koron would probably know about the movements of the emperor. However, the commander of Koron was also aware of the presence of the Muslim contingent, so that he "went out with all the cavalry who were with him in Qurra and concealed himself in ambush in the mountain that lay between Qurra and Durra". 'Amr al-Farghānī succeeded in avoiding a clash with the forces of Koron and even managed to capture a number of Byzantines of the imperial army. After that he rode back with them to Ashnās. Ṭabarī says that they met Ashnās "on the Lamas", meaning the south margin of

⁴⁵ Bury (1909) 121–3 has explained the reference of Ṭabarī to the river Lamos in Cilicia as a mistake for Halys. See also Vasiliev (1935) 146, note 4 and Bosworth (1991) 100, note 296.

⁴⁶ Ṭabarī III.1237–1238, trans. Bosworth (1991) 99–100.

the Halys.⁴⁷ Apparently Ashnās had moved north in the meantime, leaving Marj al-Usquf and approaching the Halys, probably to the east of Nyssa,⁴⁸ although the exact routes followed by him and the main contingent led by Mu'taṣim cannot be traced with certainty (Map 6, route 6).⁴⁹

In any case, the Byzantine prisoners then informed Ashnās that the emperor, after waiting for them for 40 days on the north margin of the Halys, had left the troops under the command of the son of his maternal uncle for he wanted to join battle with the troops of Afshīn coming from the Armeniakoi.⁵⁰

As Ṭabarī stated at the beginning of his account, Afshīn was the commandant of the second Muslim contingent, who entered Byzantine territory through the pass of Adata (Map 6, route 2a).⁵¹ Afshīn was the Persian general who had defeated Bābak the year before and was an experienced soldier. In his contingent there were many Turkish cavalrymen, who played an important role in the war, as we shall see in section 17.5. Greek sources inform us that Afshīn was also joined by the troops of the emir of Melitene and important Armenian contingents led by the prince of princes.⁵² Both were affected by the campaign led by Theophilos in 837: the emir of Melitene because Theophilos had defeated him in a pitched battle, ravaged the countryside and taken hostages from the notables of the city (see Chapter 15.5); Bagarat of Taron, appointed Prince of Princes by the caliph, because the emperor had probably made an alliance in previous years with his rivals the Georgian Bagratids and plundered the Fourth Armenia (with Arsamosata), a region to the west of Taron and probably under his control (see Chapter 15.3). We do not know the route followed by the Melitenians and Armenians to enter the empire, but Bury suggested that they could have entered through the pass of Melitene and joined the army of Afshīn at Sebasteia (Map 6, route 2b).⁵³

Michael the Syrian estimates his forces at 30,000 men, a number we can at least tentatively accept considering the exceptional character of the expedition.⁵⁴ Accordingly, Afshīn certainly had available fewer soldiers than the main contingent of the caliph, but still a considerable force. Afshīn would have turned to the east, to the Armeniakoi, thus provoking Theophilos to leave his troops at the north edge

⁴⁷ Ṭabarī III.1238–1239, trans. Bosworth (1991) 100–102.

⁴⁸ Mich. Syr. 534, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 95 mentions the taking of Nīšā by the caliphal army in its progress towards Ankyra. It is described as a deserted city. Chabot translated 'Nicaea', but it was certainly Nyssa; see Vasiliev (1935) 152 and note 1.

⁴⁹ For the advance of Ashnās from Marj al-Usquf to the Halys see Vasiliev (1935) 151, note 1.

⁵⁰ Ṭabarī III.1239, trans. Bosworth (1991) 102.

⁵¹ Ṭabarī III.1237, trans. Bosworth (1991) 98–9.

⁵² Th. Cont. III.31 (126.23–127.3) and Gen. III.13 (47.23–25).

⁵³ Bury (1909) 120 and note 4.

⁵⁴ Mich. Syr. 535, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 95. Michael gives the number of the troops not when they crossed the pass of Adata, but at the moment in which they joined battle with Theophilos. Haldon (1999) 101–3 and (2006) 132–4 admits the possibility of armies of this size in big expeditions at this period.

of the Halys (where he was waiting for the caliphal army) and to march northeast, to the river Iris, leading a detachment of his troops, which included the Persian contingent and the imperial tagmata (Map 6, route A).⁵⁵ The emperor had probably decided to join in battle with Afshīn in order to avoid being attacked by his troops in the rear while he was awaiting the main army of Mu‘taṣim. This is an important point, for it means that the Byzantine troops may have been divided into two contingents of some importance, which could both risk separately a confrontation with the enemy. Although we do not know the actual number of soldiers in the army led by Theophilos in 838, it would also have been considerable. The Continuator notes a general levy ordered by Theophilos which could perhaps have been intended to help support the campaign of 838.⁵⁶ Moreover, when the troops of Theophilos were finally on the brink of engaging in battle against the troops of Afshīn, the Continuator and Genesios say that the emperor’s army seemed to be superior in numbers.⁵⁷

According to Ṭabarī, Mu‘taṣim tried to warn Afshīn of Theophilos’ movements and sent messengers to him from the region of the Maṭāmīr ordering him to wait for further instructions. But Afshīn had apparently penetrated the Byzantine territory more deeply than the caliph assumed (Map 6, route 5), so that the envoys could not find his contingent.⁵⁸ Thus Theophilos’ army met Afshīn’s in a location called Anzes,⁵⁹ near the plain of Dazimon to the south of the Iris river. Both armies joined in battle.

The imperial troops won the first clash and began pursuing the defeated Muslims, but the intervention of the archers of the Turkish cavalry encouraged the Arabs again, who turned back and slaughtered the Roman ranks.⁶⁰ The emperor and a few men, including the Persians and Manuel the Armenian with the tagmata, found themselves surrounded by the enemy. If night had not come and rain had not wet the bow strings of the Turks (rendering them useless), they would surely have met there an inevitable end.⁶¹ Fortunately for the emperor, due to the intervention of Manuel the Armenian, he was able to break the lines of the Muslim army

⁵⁵ Th. Cont. III.31 (127.3–5; 128.4–5) and Gen. III.14 (48.30–31 and 46–47).

⁵⁶ Th. Cont. III.7 (93.11–13): ‘when on account of some urgency the emperor commanded that even those who had ceased from service on whatsoever ground should go out to battle’ (ἐπεὶ κατὰ τινα περιπέτειαν πάντας ἐκέλευσεν ὁ βασιλεὺς καὶ τοὺς οἰαδήποτε αἰτία πεπανμένους ἐξιέναι πρὸς πόλεμον ...). This reference appears connected with the story of a general who stole a soldier’s horse and gave it to the emperor. The same story appears in Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 31 (225.204–226.225) just before the account of the military campaign of 838, but without any reference to a levy.

⁵⁷ Th. Cont. III.31 (127.13–14) and Gen. III.14 (48.36–37).

⁵⁸ Ṭabarī III.1239–1240, trans. Bosworth (1991) 102–3.

⁵⁹ The place is usually called Anzen in modern research, for it is usually named in the accusative in the Greek sources. However, it appears as Ἀνζῆς in Gen. IV.14 (66.34).

⁶⁰ Th. Cont. III.31 (127.17–128.4) and Gen. III.14 (48.42–46).

⁶¹ Th. Cont. III.31 (128.4–11) and Gen. III.14 (48.46–49).

that surrounded him and rode away to meet the main contingents of his army.⁶² According to the Continuator and Genesisios, Theophilos joined the remaining troops at the plain of Chiliokomon that lay between the Halys and Iris rivers (Map 6, route B.2). There he found the generals who had deserted the army. After confessing their fault amidst tears, they received an imperial pardon, provided they would continue fighting against the Arabs.⁶³

Ṭabarī has preserved a more accurate version of the movements of the emperor after his defeat in Anzes, for the Greek sources do not mention that the emperor left the main army on the north margin of the Halys when he departed to meet Afshīn. Ṭabarī's version is reported again through the voices of Byzantine prisoners who inform the caliph of what happened in the meantime. The caliph took these new prisoners when his contingent, after failing in an attempt to contact Afshīn, proceeded to Ankyra, but faced increasing problems because of the lack of water and fodder (Map 6, route 7). Mālik ibn Kaydar, a man of Ashnās (who continued to march in the vanguard), managed however to capture some Byzantine soldiers who had taken refuge in salt mines after fleeing from Ankyra with their families.⁶⁴ The Byzantines, when questioned, told Mālik again, as the prisoners taken at Qurra had previously done, how the Byzantine emperor had abandoned the main army on the Halys to fight Afshīn (Map 6, route A).⁶⁵ However, the leader of the Byzantine captives now added some new information about the outcome of the encounter between the two armies. He said that the contingent of the emperor first put to flight and killed the infantrymen of Afshīn. However, "then our own troops split up into groups to pursue them, but at noon their cavalry returned and engaged us in battle fiercely until they pierced our ranks and mingled with us and we with them".⁶⁶ This version is very close to that transmitted by the Greek sources, except that the Turkish identity of the cavalry is not mentioned.

The prisoner continues telling how he and other companions took flight and came back to the place on the north margin of the Halys where the main army of the emperor had been left to wait for the caliph's troops (Map 6, route B.1). However, upon their arrival they discovered that the army had mutinied and deserted. Theophilos came later with a few men. The fact that the Greek sources say that Theophilos reassembled the rest of his troops in Chiliokomon, further to the north, may be explained if we understand that this was the place to which Theophilos moved after finding that the main army on the Halys had been broken up (Map 6, route C).⁶⁷ The Chiliokomon plain was probably the place to which some troops on the Halys had already departed when they deserted, so that Theophilos might have followed the same route in their pursuit. He must

⁶² Th. Cont. III.32 (128.11–22) and Gen. III.14 (48.50–60).

⁶³ Th. Cont. III.32 (128.22–129.7) and Gen. III.14 (48.60–49.66).

⁶⁴ Ṭabarī III.1240–1242, trans. Bosworth (1991) 103–5.

⁶⁵ Ṭabarī III.1242, trans. Bosworth (1991) 105.

⁶⁶ Ṭabarī III.1242–1243, trans. Bosworth (1991) 105–6.

⁶⁷ Ṭabarī III.1243, trans. Bosworth (1991) 106.

have proceeded swiftly, for he could have re-encountered the troops of Afshīn marching towards Ankyra after the Byzantine defeat at Anzes (Map 6, route 8). As we know that the Persian troops in Anzes took flight until they reached Sinope (Map 6, routes B.2 and E) and rebelled then against the emperor (see, however, Chapter 13), it is also conceivable that Theophilos expected to regroup part of these contingents marching to the north.

The Byzantine prisoner gave Mālik ibn Kaydar further details that present Theophilos in very favourable light, as a courageous ruler who did not lose his temper even in the most difficult situation, after narrowly escaping death at the hands of the enemy. Facing unexpected (almost massive) desertion among his troops, the emperor decided first, according to the report of the prisoner, to execute his own relative whom he had left in charge of the army. Theophilos thus reasserted his authority and avoided being accused of weakness or partiality towards a close member of his family. Most important, he was then able to pardon the rest of the officers for their cowardice, a fact that is registered, as we saw, by the Continuator and Genesisios: Theophilos needed the officers of his army to continue fighting and could not risk alienating their support in such a critical moment. This measure accords with the next step taken by the emperor, according to the prisoner: Theophilos also gave instructions to the neighbouring cities ordering them to return the fugitives, so that “all the troops might gather together and encamp in order to resist the king of the Arabs”. Finally, the emperor sent one of his servants, a eunuch, to Ankyra, probably with some troops and the order to defend the city at any cost before the the caliph’s troops came (Map 6, route D). Since the protospatharios Theodore Krateros, at the time probably strategos of the Boukellarioroi and later one of the 42 martyrs of Amorion, was a eunuch, it is possible to identify him with this envoy.⁶⁸ In any case, the details provided by Ṭabarī are very significant, and although mentioned already in modern studies dealing with the battle,⁶⁹ show that Theophilos was not dismayed at this conjuncture and tried to continue the fight against the caliph.

Unfortunately for Theophilos, panic spread among the people of the region, so that when Theodore Krateros arrived at Ankyra, its inhabitants had already left the city and fled. Krateros informed Theophilos of the abandonment of Ankyra, perhaps as the emperor was already in Chiliokomon or proceeding to the west, marching through Bithynia (Map 6, route F). Theophilos wrote back ordering him to proceed onward to Amorion to defend the city. The prisoner, however, who seems to have accompanied Krateros until the latter reached Ankyra, did not accompany him to Amorion (Map 6, route G), but sought the refugees of Ankyra and joined them at the salt mines, where he was captured.⁷⁰

The report of the prisoner to Mālik ibn Kaydar ends here and with it all direct information Ṭabarī provides about the movements of Theophilos after the battle of

⁶⁸ Treadgold (1988) 301. This possibility is not mentioned in *PmbZ* #7679.

⁶⁹ See Vasiliev (1935) 157–8 and Treadgold (1988) 300–301.

⁷⁰ Ṭabarī III.1243, trans. Bosworth (1991) 106–7.

Anzes. The emperor is then said in Ṭabarī to have sent envoys to Muʿtaṣim when he had already started to besiege Amorion, but no precise information is given about Theophilos' whereabouts. This lack of direct information as to what happened to the rest of the Byzantine army after Theophilos sent his envoy to Ankyra is easily explained by the absence of any direct witness of events who could recount them to the main army of Muʿtaṣim. In fact, the narrative perspective followed in Ṭabarī (or better, in his source) for the campaign of 838 is, as we mentioned, that of a person who was in the vanguard of Muʿtaṣim's contingent (with Ashnās, 'Amr al-Farghānī and Mālik ibn Kaydar), who either recorded everything he personally witnessed or reported in direct speech the information provided by the prisoners. The events this narrator neither witnessed nor heard described are absent from his account. No wonder that the rebellion of Theophobos, which followed the defeat of Anzes and probably forced the retreat of Theophilos to Dorylaion or Nikaia, is absent from Ṭabarī's report, for no witness to it was available. This rebellion, however, explains why Theophilos could not do anything effective to defend Amorion (see Chapter 12).

With the information provided by the Byzantine prisoner, Mālik ibn Kaydar returned to the vanguard of Ashnās, carrying also a great number of sheep, goats and cattle taken from the Ankyran refugees at the salt mines. The troops of Ashnās then proceeded to Ankyra, where the main army of Muʿtaṣim coming from Nyssa joined them on the following day (Map 6, route 7). On the fourth day, Afshīm also arrived in Ankyra (Map 6, route 8). The two contingents of the Arab army remained there some days and then continued their advance against Amorion, marching in three contingents led by Ashnās, Muʿtaṣim and Afshīm (Map 6, route 9). After seven days of marching, they arrived in the capital of the Anatolikoi, one day's distance from each other, and encircled the city preparing for a siege.⁷¹

There follows in Ṭabarī a very detailed account of Amorion's siege that is not worth repeating here.⁷² We will limit ourselves to singling out some of the main points relevant for our argument.

17.3 The Treachery

As we have seen, the walls of the city were damaged in a certain spot because of heavy rainstorms. According to Ṭabarī, the governor of the city did not repair the walls properly, as Theophilos had ordered, so that when the Arabs were informed of the weak point in the defences by a Muslim renegade, they put mangonels in front of it. With them they were soon able to open a breach.⁷³ Michael the Syrian mentions that already three days of fierce fighting had passed when

⁷¹ Ṭabarī III.1243–1245, trans. Bosworth (1991) 107–8.

⁷² Ṭabarī III.1245–1256, trans. Bosworth (1991) 108–21. See Vasiliev (1935) 160–77.

⁷³ Ṭabarī III.1245, trans. Bosworth (1991) 108–9.

“a breach in the wall was shown to the Arabs”.⁷⁴ Although he does not mention the renegade, he confirms that the discovery of the breach was crucial in taking the city. In fact, this breach was the point through which the troops of Mu‘taṣim entered the city after 12 days of siege.⁷⁵ However, the Byzantines continued their strenuous resistance even after the Arabs discovered the breach and it was only a second betrayal that enabled the Arabs to take the city. This second traitor was “the commander responsible for the place where the wall breached” and is named W(a)ndū in Ṭabarī.⁷⁶ As his name is translated as “bull” in Arabic, there is no problem identifying him with the Boiditzes (Βοῖδίτζης) mentioned in the Greek sources.⁷⁷ There can be no doubt that this second traitor existed, but it is a different matter to follow the Greek sources, mainly of hagiographical character, in their blackened portrait of the man, who appears later in Sāmarrā trying to convert to Islam the Greek “martyrs” taken in Amorion.⁷⁸ Propagandistic aims and literary embellishment of the Greek sources thus conceal the real motives behind Boiditzes’ treason, which may emerge only from an attentive reading of the narrative of the siege.⁷⁹

It was thus the discovery of the weak point in the wall by the first (anonymous) traitor that, if true, sealed the destiny of Amorion, for the second betrayal, that of Boiditzes, was but the logical consequence of the desperate position of the troops under his command, who for several days defended the open breach in the walls against repeated assaults by the Arabs and the massive bombardment of the mangonels. Ṭabarī says that Boiditzes’ soldiers “fought strenuously night and day, but the whole weight of the fighting was on the shoulders of him and his troops alone, and neither Yāṭīs (Aetios) nor anyone else would reinforce him with a single Byzantine soldier”. Boiditzes even asked personally for more men but the rest of the defenders refused to help him with a single man and just ordered him to manage as best as he could.⁸⁰ Under these circumstances it is understandable that Boiditzes negotiated his surrender with the besiegers. That Boiditzes was even deceived by the Arabs is made evident by Ṭabarī, who makes him exclaim, when noticing that the Arabs had entered the city while he was parleying with

⁷⁴ Mich. Syr. 535–536, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 98.

⁷⁵ The number of days is given by Mich. Syr. 538, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 100. See also for other sources Vasiliev (1935) 170, note 1.

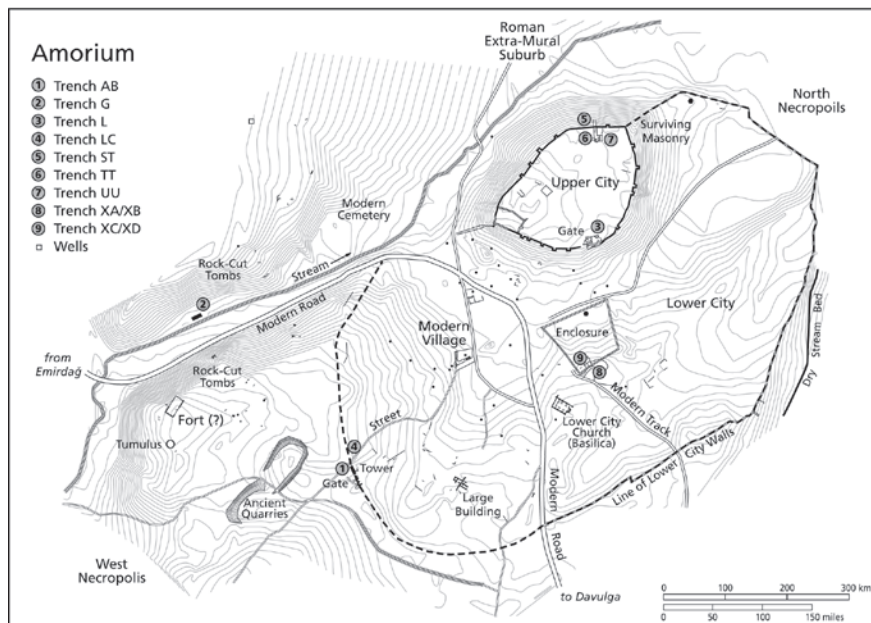
⁷⁶ Ṭabarī III.1250–1252, trans. Bosworth (1991) 114–15. The traitor is also mentioned as Bôḏīn in Mich. Syr. 536, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 98 and Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography* 150, trans. Budge (1932) vol. 1, 137.

⁷⁷ Th. Cont. III.34 (130.11): Βοῖδίτζης; Gen. III.11 (45.70–71): ᾧ βοὸς ὑποκοριζόντως ὄνομα; Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 33 (227.240–241): προεδόθη γὰρ ὑπὸ τε τοῦ λεγομένου Βοῖδίτζη καὶ τοῦ Μανικοφάγου.

⁷⁸ *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. A, 4.37 and vers. Δ, 71.32: Βοῶδις. This corresponds to Th. Cont. III.35 (132.11): Βοῖδίτζης.

⁷⁹ For the distortion of the sources see in general Vasiliev (1935) 163, note 2.

⁸⁰ Ṭabarī III.1251, trans. Bosworth (1991) 114.



Map 7 Amorion, topographical site plan by S. Aydal. Courtesy of the Amorion Excavations Project.

al-Mu‘tašim: “What is the matter with you? I came because I wanted to hear your words and to let you hear mine, but you have acted treacherously with me!”⁸¹

If we trust the Greek hagiographies, this Boiditzes later converted to Islam from Christianity, when he was in Sāmarrā,⁸² so he cannot be identified as the first traitor, who was a Muslim held captive by the Amorians and “who had then become a Christian and married among them”. The first traitor seems to be an otherwise unknown converted Muslim, who, if we follow Ṭabarī, “had hidden himself away when the Byzantines had entered the fortress” of Amorion in order to make contact with his former co-religionists.⁸³ In contrast, Boiditzes was a Greek commander, a notable of the city according to Michael the Syrian.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ṭabarī III.1252, trans. Bosworth (1991) 115.

⁸² Th. Cont. III.35 (132.10) says that Boiditzes “denied the Christ” (τὸν Χριστὸν ἀρνησάμενος), i.e. made apostasy. The *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. A, 4.37 and Z, 71.31–32 even specify that he “initiated in the faith of the Saracens and denied Christ” (τὸν Σαρακηνῶν μύστης καὶ τῆς Χριστοῦ πίστεως ἕξαρνος). His conversion to Islam in Sāmarrā was perhaps unavoidable once he appeared responsible for the massacre of the population at Amorion.

⁸³ Ṭabarī III.1245, trans. Bosworth (1991) 108.

⁸⁴ Mich. Syr. 536, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 98–9.

Therefore it is with him that we should identify the “Lāwī the patrician” who, according to Mas‘ūdī, “went to him (i.e. the caliph) from the city and submitted it to him”.⁸⁵ Mas‘ūdī has preserved just a short mention of the siege, but he is a well-informed author and wrote a detailed account of the siege of Amorion in another work of his that has since become lost.⁸⁶ His reference to this Lāwī is thus not to be ignored, although it must be reconciled with the name Boiditzes/W(a)ndū preserved by the other sources. Probably Boiditzes was just a nickname of the patrician Lāwī, acquired in connection with the siege.⁸⁷ If this is accepted, how should we then interpret the name Lāwī? Barbier de Meynard in his translation of the passage (followed by Vasiliev) interpreted the name as Leo, but in fact Mas‘ūdī uses other wording for Leo, Līw(u)n, when he refers to this name.⁸⁸ The wording of the name refers to the Jewish name of Levi, which makes it possible to consider that the patrician referred to was in fact of Jewish origin.⁸⁹ This is not unlikely at first sight, for the Continuator linked the city of Amorion with Jews and the heresy of the Athinganoi in a long excursus dealing with the origins of Michael of Amorion.⁹⁰ Genesisos mentioned the presence of Athinganoi in Amorion in the corresponding passage, but omitted any mention of the Jews.⁹¹ However, when dealing with the treachery of Boiditzes, Genesisos says that the man “seized upon the occasion of some seditious quarrel that broke out at that time between the

⁸⁵ Mas‘ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold* 136, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 332. Mas‘ūdī also mentions the patrician Bātīs (surely an error for Yātīs = Aetios, as in Arab B and Y are easily confused with each other) as the commander of Amorion, so that he must be a different person from Lāwī.

⁸⁶ Vasiliev (1935) 328.

⁸⁷ In Th. Cont. III.34 (130.15–17) Boiditzes indicates to the Arabs the spot on the walls where they launch their attack by mentioning that there lay on the top of the towers “a stone ox (βούδιον) and lion of marble”. Vasiliev (1935) 163, note 1 considers that the reference to the stone ox is “une historiette étymologique” for explaining the name of Boiditzes. But *PmbZ* #1019 considers that the known name of the place at the walls could have been transferred as surname to the person responsible for its defence. We quote again Genesisos III.11 (45.70–71), who uses the term ὑποκριζόντως to refer to Boiditzes’ ὄνομα.

⁸⁸ See for example Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb at-tanbīh* 129, trans. Carra de Vaux (1896) 230, where he mentions the emperor Leo the Armenian as Līw(u)n five times. There is no ground, as suggested by Vasiliev (1935) 163, note 1, for seeing Leo the Philosopher in this Lāwī. The only connection between Leo the Philosopher and the siege of Amorion is made in Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 33–4 (227.237–240 and 227.249–228.250), who refers to a *disciple* of Leo the Philosopher present in the besieged Amorion and later taken captive to Sāmarrā. The same story is related in Th. Cont. IV.27 (185.15–191.3) but without indication of the circumstances in which the disciple of Leo was made captive and even referring to the caliphate of Ma’mūn. It seems that the Logothete simply connected the capture of the disciple of Leo with the siege of Amorion in order to find a convenient historical setting for this story.

⁸⁹ In *Acta Mart. Amor.*, vers. Δ, 42.19–20 the traitor is named “a second Judas” (δεύτερον Ἰουδᾶν), but this reference is not conclusive.

⁹⁰ Th. Cont. II.3 (42.7–43–17).

⁹¹ Gen. II.2 (23.84–85).

Christian and the Jews".⁹² We are perhaps pushing the evidence too far if we try to connect this quarrel with the problems Boiditzes had with the other sections of the Byzantine army defending the city, for he was denied any help, according to Ṭabarī, as we have seen. But it is not inconceivable that the differences among the various religious groups inside the city resulted in confrontation when they were faced with the impending assault of the Arab besiegers. If the Lāwī of Mas'ūdī was in fact Boiditzes and had Jewish origins, the words of Genesios about the internal quarrel of the defenders could not but be right.

We can therefore conclude that if the Byzantine army was not able to defend Amorion when faced by the invaders, it was due first and foremost to the poor state of a section of the walls, which was badly repaired before the beginning of the siege. Once the breach was revealed and widened by the continuous bombardment of the mangonels, the fate of the city was sealed and the second treachery by Boiditzes only predictable, whether a consequence or not of the internal quarrels dividing the population. Certainly, the inhabitants of Amorion may still have cherished hopes of a rescue from the siege, because they obviously did not know that a message of Aetios to the emperor had been intercepted.⁹³ But they knew of Theophilos' defeat at Anzes and probably imagined that the emperor could not risk a second pitched battle with the caliph's main army.

This leads us to consider now how inactive Theophilos remained before the siege of Amorion and whether he actually offered a treaty of peace to the caliph even before Amorion surrendered.

17.4 Theophilos' Offer of Peace

At the end of his narrative of the siege and capture of Amorion Ṭabarī inserts this comment:

The king of the Byzantines had sent an envoy [i.e. to negotiate peace]⁹⁴ when Mu'taṣim first besieged 'Ammūriyya, but Mu'taṣim ordered the envoy to be made to stay at a watering place three miles from 'Ammūriyya, where the troops were providing themselves with good drinking water; he would not let the envoy come to him until he had conquered 'Ammūriyya. Only then did he allow the envoy to go back to the king of the Byzantines, which he did.⁹⁵

Nothing is said here about the aims and purposes of this embassy sent by Theophilos to Mu'taṣim when he had just laid siege to Amorion. The precision of the translators that the envoy was sent "to negotiate peace" is just a guess,

⁹² Gen. III.11 (45.71–46.72).

⁹³ Ṭabarī III.1246–1247, trans. Bosworth (1991) 109–10

⁹⁴ Translator's note.

⁹⁵ Ṭabarī III.1254, trans. Bosworth (1991) 117.

although a very likely one. This does not however mean that Theophilos was willing to comply with the demands of the caliph at any cost in order to avoid further damage to the Byzantines. We could equally surmise that the emperor tried to open negotiations with the Arabs in order to win some time to reorganize his troops in order to strike back. As a matter of fact, he might have been ignorant of the damages to Amorion's wall and hoped that a long siege would be disadvantageous to the besiegers. That Mu'tašim was diffident about the emperor's intention is perhaps evidenced by the fact that he kept the Byzantine envoys at a place three miles away from the siege. Thus he prevented them from observing the scene of the battle taking place in front of the walls of Amorion and obtaining compromising information about his army. He kept them apart for a few days, but we do not know whether he received them when the city was finally taken, for the text only says that after this the caliph allowed them to go back to Theophilos.

The next passage in Ṭabarī, immediately following this piece, is revealing of the problems the caliph still had to resolve before returning safely to Sāmarrā:

Mu'tašim went back in the direction of the frontier region, as he had heard that the king of the Byzantines intended to set out following his tracks or else aimed at harrying the Muslim forces. He accordingly proceeded along the main highway for one stage but then returned to 'Ammūriyya and ordered the troops to turn back also. He now turned aside from the main highway onto the road leading to the Wādī al-Jawr. He distributed the prisoners among the commanders; and to each one of these last he gave a group to guard. The commanders in turn divided them among their troops. They travelled along a road for about forty miles, a waterless stretch, and they executed every prisoner who, because of the intense thirst he was suffering, refused to keep up with them. The troops entered the desert on the road through the Wādī al-Jawr, they were struck by thirst, so that both men and beasts kept falling down, and some of the prisoners killed some of the soldiers and escaped.

Mu'tašim had travelled on ahead of the army and now came to meet the troops with water that he had brought from the place where he had encamped; nevertheless, many of the troops died of thirst in that valley. The troops told Mu'tašim, "These prisoners have killed some of our soldiers." So he immediately ordered Basil al-Rūmī to sort out those prisoners who were of high rank, and these were set on one side, then he further ordered that the remainder were to be taken up the mountains and brought down into the valleys and executed en masse. These amounted to 6,000 men, killed in two places, in the Wādī al-Jawr and in another place. Mu'tašim pressed on from there in the direction of the frontier zone until he reached Ṭarsūs. Water troughs made from leather had been set down for him around his encampment and all the way to the encampment at 'Ammūriyya; these were now filled, and the troops drank from them, untiring in their demand for water.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Ṭabarī III.1254–1255, trans. Bosworth (1991) 118–19.

As every strategist knows, no victory can be proclaimed until the withdrawal of the invading army to its headquarters is successfully completed. Apparently Mu'taṣim knew of the dangers he could yet face in Byzantine Anatolia. Ṭabarī expressly says that he expected attacks and harassment from the Byzantine troops.⁹⁷ This obviously means that no sincere offer of peace had already been made to the caliph and that the Byzantine army was still able to cause trouble for the Arab troops. This forced the caliph to make a diverting manoeuvre when he left Amorion, for he first proceeded along the main route just for one day and turned back to the city in order to take a secondary route the Byzantines did not expect him to follow. The reason lies in the lack of water and supplies on this alternative way, a circumstance that made the return of the Arab army something of a nightmare. Apparently, the caliph avoided the main route from Amorion to Ikonion, running west of the Lake of the Forty Martyrs and passing through Philomelion (Map 6, route 10a),⁹⁸ and followed instead an eastern route close to the salty desert southwest of the Tatta Lake (today Tuz Gölü) (Map 6, route 10b).⁹⁹ Many prisoners, an important part of the spoils of war for the Arabs, managed to take flight or even killed some of their guardians, so that the caliph had in the end no other option than to execute them en masse to ensure a safe retreat for his troops.¹⁰⁰ As we see, there is nothing in the narrative of Ṭabarī that suggests that Theophilus had given up the war against the invading Muslim army after the taking of Amorion.

Genesios also mentions an embassy the emperor sent to the caliph before the taking of Amorion in terms that are perfectly coherent with the version of Ṭabarī:

[After Amorion fell] the ambassadors were insulted and sent away (for they had been detained by the enemy during the siege) and the messages that they brought to the emperor from his enemy consisted of vicious reproaches and contemptuous threats.¹⁰¹

Again, no indication is given about the nature of the message the Byzantine ambassadors carried for the caliph. Genesios' account agrees with Ṭabarī's that

⁹⁷ Lightfoot and Lightfoot (2007) 54: "Time was not on al-Mu'taṣim's side, for the summer was already drawing on, and he must have been fearful that Theophilus' routed troops would regroup and cut off his line of retreat."

⁹⁸ According to a short entry in the *Synaxarium Const.* 277–80, referring to the life of John of Polybotos, when the Arab army besieged Amorion, it also plundered the saint's city (καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ Πολύβοτον... ἰσχυρῶς λησάμενον). Polybotos lies on the border of the Lake of the Forty Martyrs (5 km west of the modern Bolvadin), so that it could have been attacked when the caliph first decided to retreat westward along route 10a. But nothing certain can be concluded from this short reference. See also Belke and Mersich (1990) 363–4.

⁹⁹ Belke (1984) 97–101, 230–31.

¹⁰⁰ For the place of their execution see Belke (1984) 212–13 s.v. "Pankaleia" and 242–3 s.v. "Wādī l-Ġauz" (i.e. Wādī al-Djaur).

¹⁰¹ Gen. III.11 (46.75–78), trans. Kaldellis (1998) 60.

they were retained by the caliph. And the caliph's insulting answer to Theophilos after the taking of Amorion, although not indicated in Ṭabarī, was predictable.

The Continuator, however, presents a slightly different version of events, based on the same source as Genesis:

Meanwhile, returning to Dorylaion, Theophilos attempted with gifts to make the other depart from thence and return to his own country (τοῦ δώροις αὐτὸν ἐκεῖθεν ἀποστῆσαι καὶ πρὸς τὰ οἰκεῖα ποιῆσαι παλιννοστῆσαι). But the Ameramnunes paid no heed, guarding in his inner thoughts the sack and pillage of the other's home city. Rather, he reviled and called him a slave and coward, sneering and mocking at the fact that Theophilos had not heeded him earlier but only now when he stood on the razor's edge. Envoys who had been sent there were also observers and witnesses of what was going on.¹⁰²

This is the only source that mentions the purpose of the embassy sent by Theophilos to the caliph, but I suspect that this is an addition of the Continuator, who liked to amplify the narrative of his sources in order to present a more detailed account of events.¹⁰³ The harsher tone used to describe the humiliation of the ambassadors of the iconoclast emperor follows the same pattern. In any case, there is nothing particularly relevant in the information provided by the Continuator, and, particularly, no offer of peace is mentioned, although we can surmise that the emperor tried to come to an agreement with the caliph by sending gifts along with his envoys.

At the end of the ninth century, the Arab writer Ya'qūbī includes in his *History* a very short mention of the campaign of Mu'taṣim in 838. However, he refers to an embassy sent by Theophilos to the caliph and provides some interesting details about it that no other source has preserved. According to Ya'qūbī, when Theophilos was told that the caliph was relentlessly besieging Amorion, he set off on campaign against him with a large army. As the emperor came near to Mu'taṣim's camp, the caliph sent Afshīn against him, also leading a sizeable force. When both joined in battle, Afshīn defeated the emperor, put him to flight and killed many of his soldiers. It was then that Theophilos sent ambassadors to Mu'taṣim with the following message:

Those who did to Zibaṭra what they did, they exceeded my orders. I will rebuild the city at my own expense with the help of my people. I will restore all the inhabitants I took prisoner, I will return all the prisoners who are on Greek soil and I will deliver the men who committed atrocities at Zibaṭra because of the wrongdoing of the patricians.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Th. Cont. III.33 (129.16–130.1).

¹⁰³ Signes Codoñer (1995) 672–3. The fact that he says the same thing twice (αὐτὸν ἐκεῖθεν ἀποστῆσαι = πρὸς τὰ οἰκεῖα ποιῆσαι παλιννοστῆσαι) is also a mark of his style for these duplications abound in the Continuator and are usually absent in Genesis.

¹⁰⁴ Ya'qūbī, *History* 580–81, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 275.

After this Ya'qūbī refers to the fact that Amorion was taken on the 17th of the Ramadan month of HA 223, a Tuesday, which corresponds to 12 August 838, which was however a Monday. He then closes his account by saying that Mu'taṣim killed and captured the inhabitants of Amorion, including Yāṯis (Aetios), and that he also burned everything he found on his way before leaving. No further information about Theophilos is found in the work after this point.

Modern historians have taken the information provided by Ya'qūbī at face value and identified the embassy mentioned by the historian with the one sent by Theophilos to Mu'taṣim when he was besieging Amorion. Vasiliev, for example, says that Theophilos was less hostile after the defeat at Anzes and, oblivious of his victorious campaign the year before, he sent an embassy to Mu'taṣim with the mission of offering his excuses and making humiliating promises. He then copies the text of Ya'qūbī.¹⁰⁵

As a matter of fact, as we have seen in Ṭabarī's account, even after Amorion the caliph feared further attacks from the emperor so that a defeatist embassy from Theophilos does not fit in well with this evidence. Most important, the information provided by Ya'qūbī about the campaign of 838 is scanty and inaccurate. It seems that the writer made a hasty summary of a long narrative, for he makes Theophilos take the field only when Mu'taṣim began his siege of Amorion. But, as we know, the emperor had left Constantinople well before Mu'taṣim entered Byzantine territory. Theophilos' defeat at Anzes also preceded the arrival of the caliph's troops at Amorion and was not subsequent to it, as Ya'qūbī maintains. Therefore I would not give too much importance to the idea that Theophilos is said to write to the caliph after Anzes out of repentance for the misdeeds at Sozopetra. It could be that Theophilos wrote to Mu'taṣim after his defeat at Anzes, but not necessarily when the siege of Amorion was already under way. He could have written to Mu'taṣim some months later, when the caliph was already back in Syria. As we will soon see, according to several sources Theophilos effectively sent a second embassy to Mu'taṣim when the campaign of 838 was over, offering him a lasting peace. Michael the Syrian in particular, who mentions this second embassy, even says that Theophilos repented then for the misdeeds of his troops at Sozopetra.¹⁰⁶ Therefore Ya'qūbī, who compresses his account of the campaign into a minimal amount of information, could have found it more expedient, from a narrative point of view, to connect the details he had at his disposal about this later embassy directly with the defeat at Anzes, just to show effectively to his readers its immediate impact on the emperor. We must not forget that according to Ya'qūbī the expedition of Theophilos against Sozopetra and the retaliatory expedition of Mu'taṣim against Amorion both took place in Hegira 223 and not in two successive years, as we know was the case.¹⁰⁷ Ya'qūbī thus produced a condensed narrative of events, where the crime (the plundering of Sozopetra

¹⁰⁵ Vasiliev (1935) 160. See also Rosser (1972) 232–3 and Treadgold (1988) 302.

¹⁰⁶ For details, see immediately below.

¹⁰⁷ For the dating of the campaign against Sozopetra in Arab sources, see Chapter 16.

by the Byzantines) found a deserved and immediate punishment (the taking of Amorion), thus moving Theophilos to repentance. It is therefore significant that Ya‘qūbī only refers to the excuses given by Theophilos to the caliph on account of his troops’ misdeeds at Sozopetra. The historian does not make any mention of the purposes of the embassy or whether Theophilos sued for peace when he addressed the caliph. Nothing is said, moreover, of gifts or presents carried by the ambassadors. It seems that the focus on Sozopetra oriented Ya‘qūbī’s choice of material for his short narrative. The Arab historian cared less here about accurate chronological sequence than about narrative coherence.

There is accordingly no serious evidence suggesting that the emperor made a humiliating offer of peace to the caliph when the latter began his siege of Amorion. On the contrary, the fears of Mu‘taṣim and his harsh retreat through a desert region, as described in Ṭabarī, point to a continued resistance of the Byzantines even after the taking of the capital of the Anatolikoi.

It was only after the end of the campaign of 838, with the caliph already back in Sāmarrā, that Theophilos made him a first serious offer of peace, the purpose of which is described by Michael the Syrian in some detail. This chronicler, who does not mention any previous embassy of Theophilos, writes that when the emperor saw the damage the Arabs had inflicted upon Amorion, “he reproached himself for plundering first Sozopetra and realized that he should change his strategy”.¹⁰⁸ This reference to Theophilos’ repentance for the indiscriminate plundering of Sozopetra reminds us of Ya‘qūbī’s account about Theophilos’ wish to compensate the caliph for the slaughter done by his troops in the Syrian city. As we have argued, this is certainly a strong argument for connecting the embassy mentioned in Ya‘qūbī to the one mentioned by Michael the Syrian and for dating both after the taking of Amorion. But this also confirms that Theophilos could have given excuses for the misdeeds of his troops at Sozopetra. In fact, as we saw in Chapter 16.1, according to Michael the Syrian, “When the barbarians [i.e. the Khurramites] took it [i.e. Sozopetra], they slaughtered without mercy the Christians and the Jews. Their ferocity went so far that they raped and disembowelled the women.”¹⁰⁹ This slaughter against even the Christian population was surely not to the satisfaction of Theophilos, who could not rely on the local Christians if his troops treated them as enemies. We have also suggested that the caliph won support from among the Armenians for his campaign in 838 partly due to the indiscriminate carnage of the Khurramites in the area during the 830s. Accordingly, some kind of reparation for the wrongdoings of his troops was also in the interest of Theophilos, who thus tried to win over the population of the area and compensate them for the harm inflicted. If we also take into account that Theophilos was facing an uprising of the Persian Khurramites at the very moment the Arabs were invading the empire, we can conclude that the offer of delivering to the caliph the persons responsible for the damages at Sozopetra was not necessarily a humiliation for the emperor, but a

¹⁰⁸ Mich. Syr. 536, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 95.

¹⁰⁹ Mich. Syr. 531–2, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 88–9.

convenient move for preserving his fame for justice among his partisans, that is to say, his authority over the troops (see the Epilogue for this episode).

But the account of Michael the Syrian provides us with more details for assessing the emperor's intentions. According to the chronicler, the emperor, after reconsidering his strategy, sent Basil, patrician of Charsianon, with gifts and presents for the caliph. The ambassador carried two letters with him. In the first one Theophilos confessed his fault (again undoubtedly meaning Sozopetra) and reclaimed Aetios, offering instead to hand over to the caliph the Arab prisoners and to make peace. In the second letter, however, he included reproaches and threats in case the caliph did not accept his previous offer for peace. When the caliph Abū Ishāq (Mu'taṣim) received the first letter, he demanded not only the release of all the Arab prisoners, but also the handover of Naṣr the Khurramite, his son (meaning Theophobos: see Chapter 11) and Manuel. Basil said that this was not possible, so that the caliph dismissed him. Basil then showed him the second letter, full of threats. When it was read, the caliph was seized with anger and dispatched the ambassador back to Theophilos along with the presents he had carried.¹¹⁰

The Greek sources afford new details of this second embassy that need to be considered before assessing the text of Michael the Syrian. The Continuator says that after the taking of Amorion, Theophilos again sent ambassadors (πρέσβεις δευτέρους) to Mu'taṣim offering 200 kentenaria for the release of the prisoners taken or at least of his relatives (τοὺς ... πρὸς γένος αὐτῶ πλησιάζοντας) and the officers of the army sent by him to defend the city. The caliph again poured scorn on this offer saying that he had spent more than 1000 in acts of munificence.¹¹¹ Genesis has a similar account of the embassy, only that the amount of money offered by Theophilos is of two kentenaria and 100 and that the caliph specified that he had invested a bit less than 1000 kentenaria for the military campaign.¹¹²

As we see, the second embassy of Theophilos was made after the campaign was finished and probably when the caliph was back in Sāmarrā, for only then could he make an estimate of the expenses he had incurred. The Greek sources speak merely of a customary release of the prisoners, although the sum offered was very high, perhaps out of consideration for the importance of the persons retained or because it included some other compensations (for the damages in Sozopetra?). Michael the Syrian does not mention any sum of money offered by the emperor, but mentions an offer of peace along with the release of the Arab prisoners. Both in the Greek and the Syrian sources it was the caliph who rejected the offer made by Theophilos, either because the sum offered seemed too low or because Theophilos was not willing to hand over Naṣr and Manuel to the caliph.

It is difficult to reconcile such disparate accounts of this embassy, which is not mentioned in the Arab sources. But it appears that Theophilos did not make

¹¹⁰ Mich. Syr. 536, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 96. A similar version in Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography* 151, trans. Budge (1932) vol. 1, 138.

¹¹¹ Th. Cont. III.34 (131.7–16).

¹¹² Gen. III.12 (46.85–95).

a humiliating appeal to the caliph, but merely tried to exchange prisoners in the customary way. No agreement about the price or the compensations demanded by the caliph was reached, so that war continued and peace was postponed. The repentance of Theophilos for the slaughter in Sozopetra does not reveal a weakness on his part, but only that he was conscious of the importance of propaganda for winning over the adversary: had he reconstructed Sozopetra at his own expense, he would surely have made good his previous errors. We can therefore conclude that the emperor had certainly lost the campaign of 838, but was prepared to continue the war. If our conclusion is right, then the military outcome was not so bad for Theophilos after all, despite the problems he had faced that year. Apparently the Byzantine army continued to have at their disposal enough resources to be a threat to the caliph, as we will see in Chapter 18.3. But before considering what happened during the last years of Theophilos' reign, let us attempt a brief assessment of the impact of the campaign of Mu'tašim on the imperial army by reconsidering some of the evidence provided by the sources.

17.5 An Assessment of the Amorion Campaign

The year 838 was without any doubt the *annus horribilis* of Theophilos' reign. To begin with, the defeat at Anzes almost cost the emperor his life. Although Theophilos was able to escape, the army dispersed and many officers abandoned their post, so that even Ankyra was abandoned to its fate before the caliph's army arrived. Theophilos was apparently not able to reorganize his army and face the enemy, for rumours of usurpation forced him to come back to Constantinople. He could thus not avoid the loss of Amorion. Moreover, the caliph executed most of its inhabitants on his way back to the southern frontier. The presence of important commanders of Theophilos' army among the captives of Amorion was a severe blow to his prestige. The destruction caused in the cities, especially in Ankyra and Amorion, but also in the countryside, must not be ignored either. Lastly, the Persians rebelled against him after the battle of Anzes, seriously compromising his strategy of using them as a vanguard in his military campaigns (Chapter 12). In fact, the plundering of Sozopetra with the unjustified slaughter of the Christian population had not only provoked the massive invasion by the caliph but also alienated some supporters of the imperial cause in Syria (Chapter 16).

All these setbacks cannot be either denied or minimized: the empire was at serious risk during Mu'tašim's campaign in 838. However, the consequences for Byzantium were not so momentous as is generally assumed, for the emperor was able to react and continue the war against the caliphate. In order to understand how Theophilos succeeded in recovering from the Arab offensive, we must carefully assess the military campaign of Mu'tašim in Anatolia according to the evidence provided by the sources. It is not only a question of finding the clues explaining Mu'tašim's victory but also about re-evaluating it, avoiding every simplistic assessment.

We must also reject any psychological approach to the behaviour of the main actors of the war as an additional key to understanding the events. Our main narrative for the campaign, the history of Ṭabarī, is exemplary in this sense, for bare facts and not human reactions explain the chain of events. Curiously enough, modern historiography has not always followed this pattern and has tended to explain the consequences of the defeat at Amorion through recourse to the psychology of the emperor, who after the defeat “fell ill from the impact of this avalanche of disasters”, “never fully regained his self-assurance”, was “depressed”, “consoled himself with his favourite pastime of building” and “also developed his interest in scholarship as an indirect result of the sack of Amorion”.¹¹³ We must certainly not overlook the fact that the Continuator and Genesisios mention that the emperor, affected by the sack of Amorion, drank ice-cold water to assuage the heat of his heart and thus became ill from dysentery.¹¹⁴ But we must approach the information with prudence, as the psychological explanation for Theophilos' heart inflammation, namely that it was caused by the news of the sack of Amorion, may just be an inference of the Greek source common to both authors. The fact that the Continuator says that Theophilos died as a consequence of this dysentery (τῆ νόσῳ ταύτῃ τοῦ βίου γενέσθαι ἐκτός)¹¹⁵ is a first warning, for Theophilos lived until January 842, almost four more years. Perhaps his health felt the effects of dysentery in his last years, for he died very young. He might have even become depressed as a result. But we must judge him by his acts, avoiding pushing too far the evidence of his illness. In any case, even ill, the emperor continued ruling the empire.

We must also try to prevent our assessment of the campaign of 838 being influenced by the tendentious narrative of the *Acta Martyrum Amoriensium*, a collection of hagiographical texts written after the death of Theophilos and extolling the pious death of the 42 Byzantine officers taken as hostages by Mu'taṣim in Amorion. As the “42 martyrs” were executed in Sāmarrā in 845,¹¹⁶ all these hagiographies were written after Theophilos' death in 842 and the re-establishment of icon worship in 843, under the impact of the untimely death of the hostages. Although a thorough study of these texts is still lacking, whereby intentions and aims of the different authors could be assessed, it is in the nature of this literary genre to magnify the impact of the catastrophe on the empire in order to provide an adequate dramatic setting for the later sacrifice of the martyrs. This

¹¹³ Treadgold (1988) 304–7. See also Lightfoot and Lightfoot (2007) 57: “The city’s destruction had a profound effect on Theophilus himself, leaving him a sad and broken man. The siege of AD 838 can also be regarded as a major turning point in Byzantine history, for the city’s fall marked the final humiliation of iconoclasm and led directly to the restoration of the veneration of holy icons in AD 843.”

¹¹⁴ Th. Cont. III.34 (131.16–21) and Gen. III.14 (49.70–73).

¹¹⁵ The word βίου has been omitted in the modern editions of the text, but appears in the Vat. gr. 167.

¹¹⁶ We do not even have a complete list of their names. See however *PmbZ* #10542 (“Anonymi 42”).

is especially evident in the later versions.¹¹⁷ Moreover, although some old versions (Version B) still present Theophilos in a favourable light, most of them make him responsible for the disaster and therefore for the death of the martyrs. This was the best way to exculpate the iconophile entourage of Michael III for the failure of the release of the Byzantine hostages!

It is therefore to what the sources tell us that we must cling, ignoring as much as possible any teleological interpretation of the campaign. Ṭabarī is again a good starting point, for every detail he provides which diminishes the importance of Mu‘taṣim’s victory or speaks for the effective resistance of the Byzantines has no serious reason to be questioned. Had he tried to magnify the importance of the Byzantine resistance to make Mu‘taṣim’s victory even greater, we should have expected that each aspect favouring the Byzantines was compensated by another one crediting Mu‘taṣim’s course of action. But this is not the case.

We have seen above that Mu‘taṣim’s return to the caliphate was hardly a military parade, for the caliph followed a secondary route through the salty desert in order to avoid any further encounter with the Byzantines, whose military strength was apparently still redoubtable. This cost him perhaps the most valuable part of the booty: the Byzantine prisoners. As we have seen, he was obliged to execute them en masse for they were killing his own soldiers and taking flight, putting the whole army in danger. This was a great loss to the caliph in terms of money, as he probably paid the troops with the booty obtained from the sack of Amorion. In fact, Ṭabarī describes at length how the male prisoners, women and children captives and the extensive spoils of goods and equipment were divided up and sold among the different sections of his army. A representative of the chief judge was deputed to see that the division was handled fairly, but he could not avoid some soldiers pouncing upon the spoils that one commander was in the process of selling. When Mu‘taṣim saw the quarrel, he “galloped out alone (i.e. against the looters) with drawn sword, so that the troops fell back on each side before him and desisted from plundering the spoils”. After this quarrel Mu‘taṣim felt obliged to give precise orders for the sale. These instructions are detailed in Ṭabarī’s narrative.¹¹⁸

Michael the Syrian preserves a very similar report. According to him, the caliph ordered indeed that 4,000 men be executed, for there were too many inhabitants in the city. But many others were taken as captives, although no number is given. Michael mentions precious materials and objects of gold, silver and bronze distributed among the victorious soldiers, but the focus is again on the sharing of the booty. Apparently the Muslims pretended to sell the children and women separately from their fathers and husbands, thus provoking tears and lamentations

¹¹⁷ The popular reaction to the catastrophe could have been otherwise. The famous popular *Song of Armouris*, whose protagonist sets off to the east in search of his father Armouris (!), has repeatedly been connected with the taking of Amorion in 838. Significantly, its hero is full of hatred and desirous of revenge. See Beck (1971) 52–6.

¹¹⁸ Ṭabarī III.1253–4, trans. Bosworth (1991) 116–17.

in the captives. On hearing them the caliph became furious, for the auction had already begun without his permission. He galloped out against the crowd and killed some three men with his own hand while they carried slaves. Then he ordered the captives to be assembled in one place and ordered that one part be given to the officers, another to the Turks and the third one to the merchants, but always without breaking up the families.¹¹⁹ From this narrative we infer that the sharing of the booty was a cause of conflict and trouble for the Muslim army, for the financing of the expedition was dependent on it (and this explains the presence of slave-merchants in the army).¹²⁰ On the other hand, although Michael says that 4,000 men were executed in Amorion because there were too many people (probably meaning: too many to carry off to the caliphate), we may suspect that these were the men executed on the way back, for they caused much trouble for the soldiers in the retreat. Perhaps the ambitious troops had carried too many prisoners and were no longer able to continue the retreat with them.

We must conclude that it was against his will and only due to the pressure of difficult circumstances that Mu‘taṣim ordered the execution of the prisoners on his way back. This surely caused further unrest in the retreating army and probably Mu‘taṣim had to pay the soldiers to assuage the discontent. We now understand why the caliph was so infuriated when he heard of the sum of two kentenaria offered by Theophilos for the release of the Amorion commandants. As we saw, the caliph said that he had already spent a thousand kentenaria on acts of munificence.¹²¹

The enormous amount of money invested and lost in the expedition may also explain in part why no further massive expedition against Byzantium was made for many years. Peter von Sivers made a study of the then prevailing divide among the ruling elites of the caliphate between the defendants of commerce and trade and the expansionist party, who aimed at conquering new territories for imposing new taxes.¹²² Mu‘taṣim seems to have wavered between these extremes, for whereas he evacuated the military in the Thugūr frontier provinces at the beginning of his reign, the Byzantine offensive of 835–837 apparently forced him to undertake the massive campaign of 838. It is perhaps not a coincidence that, despite the apparent victory before Amorion, the caliph never again marched against Byzantium. It was not only the tensions between Turks, Persians and Arabs, but also the ruinous side

¹¹⁹ Mich. Syr. 537–8, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 100.

¹²⁰ Obviously the cash salaries paid by the state from general taxation were not enough in case of an expedition. Moreover, Kennedy (2001) 128–31, who considers the problems affecting the regular financing of the Turkish troops in the ninth century, states that “a constant theme which runs through the political struggles of this confused period was the need of the troops to secure payment of their salaries”.

¹²¹ Th. Cont. III.34 (131.7–16).

¹²² Sivers (1982). The letter sent by the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd to the emperor Constantine VI already emphasized the importance of the trade between the two empires; see Eid (1992) 80.

effects of the campaign, that probably deterred the caliph from further military enterprises on a great scale.¹²³ According to Sivers, “After Mu‘taṣim the commercial expansionists steadily gained in strength. During a transitional period extending from 842–878/227–265 military efforts declined perceptibly and the war against Byzantium assumed defensive proportions” (p. 82). That the massive war against the Christian empire was no more profitable for the Abbasids was from a Byzantine perspective certainly not a bad consequence of the Amorion campaign.

We find in the account of Ṭabarī other details that point to the Byzantine army being a fearsome rival for Mu‘taṣim, who took every precaution when he entered Byzantine territory in order to avoid being surprised by his rival. The caliph seems to have assembled a huge army and entrusted the victory to a detailed manoeuvre, which would encircle Theophilos. The emperor however also had enough soldiers to divide them into two contingents, for he left the main troops at the Halys and departed with the rest of the army to face the troops of Afshīn coming from the east. When Mu‘taṣim heard that the Byzantine emperor had marched against Afshīn, he tried by every means to avoid the clash, for he apparently feared that the Byzantine troops would prevail. He thus sent messengers to Afshīn ordering him to “remain where he was until a letter should reach him from the commander of the faithful”, obviously with further instructions, for he apparently did not know how to proceed for the moment. It is significant that Mu‘taṣim promised to each of the messengers 10,000 dirhams if they could deliver the letter, for this reveals that he considered that an encounter between the Byzantine troops and Afshīn’s contingent would be too dangerous at that moment.¹²⁴ In fact, when Theophilos joined in combat with Afshīn, the Byzantine troops defeated the Arab infantry and killed many soldiers, although the unexpected intervention of the Turkish cavalry finally reversed the outcome of the battle.

That Mu‘taṣim was afraid of the Byzantine manpower is also evidenced by the fact that he was always travelling one day’s march after the vanguard of his column, commanded by the Turkish Ashnās,¹²⁵ whereas Theophilos did not avoid a personal encounter with the enemy, albeit this could have cost him his life. Michael the Syrian makes the caliph exclaim immediately after entering Byzantine territory: “we did not do well in coming here”. An adviser, however, convinced him to march against Amorion, for it was not fitting for a ruler like him to abandon the campaign without achieving anything.¹²⁶ Now this anecdote, although fabricated, might perhaps reflect the anxieties and fears of Arab troops entering deeply into Byzantine Anatolia.

It is also worth mentioning that the Arab army faced serious problems with provisioning, not only when it retreated through the salty desert, but also when it marched towards Ankyra. According to Ṭabarī, “Mu‘taṣim’s army was reduced to

¹²³ See however Chapter 18.3 for minor campaigns against Byzantium in 839–841.

¹²⁴ Ṭabarī III.1239–40, trans. Bosworth (1991) 102–3.

¹²⁵ Ṭabarī III.1237 and 1240, trans. Bosworth (1991) 99 and 103.

¹²⁶ Mich. Syr. 535, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 97.

extreme distress because of lack of water and fodder".¹²⁷ Had Mālik ibn Kaydar, a man of Ashnās, not discovered and captured the refugees of Ankyra at the salt mines along with "a great number of sheep and goats and also cattle",¹²⁸ the expedition could have found itself in danger. This is perhaps the reason for the many and lively details given in the narrative of the expedition of the commando unit led by Mālik ibn Kaydar, in which the author of the narrative (Ṭabarī's source) seems to have taken part personally.

Even the siege of Amorion was not an easy task for the Arabs despite the breach in the walls. Ṭabarī mentions how the Arabs could not fill the trench in front of the walls because of the rocks being thrown by the defenders, so that the siege towers the Arabs tried to bring near the walls would not roll well on the uneven surface and had to be abandoned and burned.¹²⁹ The fierce resistance of the Byzantines at the breach of the walls is well described by Ṭabarī, who says that the Byzantines could effectively defend the spot because the place was narrow and apparently the numeric superiority of the assailants was of no avail.¹³⁰ Michael the Syrian adds that the caliph put his Moorish and Turkish slaves in the vanguard of the assailants with some other troops at the rear and ordered them to kill anyone who turned his back before the Byzantines.¹³¹ This reveals a lack of motivation on the part of the besiegers and can be related with the information reported by Ṭabarī about a conspiracy against Mu'ṭaṣim, which had found support among a sector of his army during the siege of Amorion.¹³² We will deal with this question in Chapter 18.1, but for now it suffices to say that the conspiracy intended to put 'Abbās, the son of Ma'mūn, on the throne.

In any case, although the bloody fight finally moved the commander Boiditzes to betray the Byzantines, the resistance continued until the very end: when the Arabs entered the city, a detachment of the Byzantine army "went along to a big church situated in one corner of 'Ammūriyya and fought there fiercely, but the Muslims troops burned the church over them, they burned to death to the last man". The patrician Aetios, general of the Anatolikoi, resisted in his tower for a while even after this.¹³³

Finally, although Amorion was taken, Ṭabarī does not say a word about its destruction. He did not say anything about Ankyra either. Although many sources mention the destruction of Amorion, perhaps the most reliable, for the details given, is Michael the Syrian. At the end of his report of the siege he says that Mu'ṭaṣim, after admiring the building of the churches and palaces of the city, set it

¹²⁷ Ṭabarī III.1240, trans. Bosworth (1991) 103.

¹²⁸ Ṭabarī III.1243–4, trans. Bosworth (1991) 107.

¹²⁹ Ṭabarī III.1247–8, trans. Bosworth (1991) 111.

¹³⁰ Ṭabarī III.1248, trans. Bosworth (1991) 111.

¹³¹ Mich. Syr. 536, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 98.

¹³² Ṭabarī III.1249–50, trans. Bosworth (1991) 112–13.

¹³³ Ṭabarī III.1252–3, trans. Bosworth (1991) 115–16.

on fire.¹³⁴ Later, in the next chapter of his work, Michael adds this important piece of information: the Arabs abandoned the city “without having been able to demolish its walls, except for a little section”.¹³⁵ The caliph probably considered that it was better to return to Sāmarrā as soon as possible than to risk a further encounter with the Byzantines. Modern archaeologists have identified a destruction layer they tend to connect with the sack of Amorion in 838, thus confirming that the city was seriously damaged as a result of Mu‘taṣim’s campaign. However, only the houses made of mud-brick and timber collapsed, while the larger stone-built structures apparently survived the catastrophe. Coins provide evidence of a break in the occupation of the city, for there is a marked decline in the number of ninth-century issues after the reign of Theophilos, but Amorion was not completely deserted and experienced a new revival after some years, although the archaeologists have not been able to provide a dating for this new phase of settlement.¹³⁶

Considering all this evidence together, we can perhaps come to the conclusion that had it not been for the defeat at Anzes and the ensuing crisis it triggered (desertion of the officers, rebellion among the Persians etc.), the caliph would surely have had much more difficulty attaining his declared target of taking Amorion. It is therefore to this battle that we must look when considering the causes of the Byzantine defeat in 838. John Haldon’s balanced assessment of the strategic importance of the battle is worth reproducing here in its entirety:

The battle of Anzes was itself strategically important, of course, for had the emperor won, he might well have been able to force the caliph to alter his plans or withdraw before he was able to reach either Ankyra or Amorion. But it was also important in being the first encounter mentioned in the sources between Byzantine troops and central Asian Turkish warriors, who were now being employed on a large scale by the caliph as a reliable and totally loyal military force, upon whom he could depend both for his own political security and as an effective fighting force.

The evidence suggests that archery had declined considerably among eastern Roman soldiers as a discipline of real tactical importance since the sixth and early seventh centuries. The use of the bow did not disappear entirely, since there always seem to have been some mounted archers and provincial infantry troops probably including some soldiers armed with bows. Nevertheless, the limited evidence makes almost no mention of archery, the standard armament for the middle Byzantine soldier consisting of sword, lance, shield and helmet, sometimes including also a lorikion or body-armour of some type.

¹³⁴ Mich. Syr. 537, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 99–100.

¹³⁵ Mich. Syr. 538, trans. Chabot (1889–1905) vol. 3, 101.

¹³⁶ Lightfoot, Karagiorgou, Kocyigit, Yaman, Linscheid and Foley (2007) 383–4 and Ivison (2008) 490.

The evidence from the eastern wars fought by the empire as well as that from the Balkans shows that the enemies of the Roman Empire relied upon the same panoply – indeed, the sources mention the sling as often as they mention the bow. And as the battle of Anzes appears to show, the Byzantines experienced great difficulties when confronted by effective archery, especially in the form of the powerful composite reflex bow wielded by the steppe nomads. The reason is almost certainly to do with the fact that this type of weapon was not native to the empire's lands, and military and tactical organization was not up to enforcing regular training and practice of the sort possible in the context of late Roman military structures.¹³⁷

Apparently, the intervention of Turkish horse archers in the battle of Anzes was decisive for the Arab victory. Their reflex bows succeeded in halting the Roman advance and gave the withdrawing Arab forces time to regroup and counterattack. Kennedy, basing his work on contemporary Arab sources, also stresses the importance of the feigned retreat by Turkish mounted archers, for they could fire as effectively backwards and forwards and shoot while their mounts moved in any direction at high speed, thus causing heavy losses to their persecutors, as was probably the case in Anzes.¹³⁸ Had not the heavy rain made their bow useless, it is entirely possible that Theophilos would not have escaped capture by the enemy, who used tactics and skills unknown to the Byzantines.

But the participation of Turkish soldiers in the campaign of 838 was not only important from a strategic and military point of view. It was also a political experiment, as the detailed study of Matthew S. Gordon has recently demonstrated.¹³⁹ Already Ma'mūn, sensitive to the changing nature of the fidelities of his troops, had backed the Turkish personal guard which his brother Abū Ishāq, the future caliph Mu'taṣim (son of a Turkish slave woman, as we saw in Chapter 17.1), had developed around him since 815. Ma'mūn's idea was to make of these Turkish warriors one of the main supports of his power. The process began not earlier than 819, when Ma'mūn arrived in Baghdad and established an alliance with his brother, who had remained in the capital during the civil war. From this moment on Abū Ishāq "was expected to direct the talents of his mounted slaves to the needs of the empire". The guard retained its standing as a private force, but was increasingly involved in the affairs of the state.¹⁴⁰ When Abū Ishāq succeeded his brother as caliph with the name of Mu'taṣim, some of the most important Turkish commanders began to take part in the military campaigns he launched. In particular, many Turkish officers played an important role in the final expedition against Bābak commanded by Afshīn in 837, although as a horse guard they were

¹³⁷ Haldon (2001) 85–6.

¹³⁸ Kennedy (2001) 120–24.

¹³⁹ See also Kennedy (2001) 118–24.

¹⁴⁰ Gordon (2001) 25–6, 44–5.

poorly suited to the mountains in which Bābak was fighting.¹⁴¹ To make this shift of power to the Turkish guard effective, Mu‘taṣim even departed from Baghdad and made nearby Sāmarrā the seat of his power in 835. There he settled the Turkish soldiers along with other elite troops created to serve him, like the Maghāriba or Arab slaves of Egypt. This was thought to put an end to the influence the Abnā’, i.e. the descendants of the Khurāsānis who brought the Abbasids to the throne (and who included both Iranians and Arabs), had enjoyed so far.¹⁴²

The next step, the definitive one for making a regular army out of a personal guard, was taken during the campaign of Amorion in 838. The caliph turned to the Turkish guard for his campaign against the Byzantines, assuming personally the overall command of the army. The success or the failure of this enterprise would surely contribute to the change of political model. If the caliph won, he would certainly develop the new model and further transfer power and authority to the newly created Turkish army. This was in fact what happened over the next several years, although Mutawakkil, Mu‘taṣim’s son and successor (847–861), was already trying to control the increasing influence of the Turks in Sāmarrā.¹⁴³

But everything was still unsettled in 838, as the caliph advanced against Amorion, knowing perhaps that not only the destiny of the Byzantine capital, but also his own future, was at stake in this military campaign. That his fears were not unfounded is proved by the conspiracy against him by some partisans of the Arab leaders of the Thugūr (frontier lands) and the Abnā’ during the siege as described by Ṭabarī (see Chapter 18.1). The conspirators could not endure the pre-eminent position Turks like Ashnās enjoyed in the caliph’s army. Their secret plan was to kill Mu‘taṣim and put on the throne his nephew ‘Abbās (the son of his brother al-Ma’mūn and perhaps even his designated heir), for ‘Abbās defended the traditional rights of the Abnā’ against the new Turkish guard.¹⁴⁴ The conspiracy failed as it was detected by Mu‘taṣim, who executed ‘Abbās on his way back to Sāmarrā. But its mere existence is further proof of the fragile equilibrium prevailing in Mu‘taṣim’s army during the campaign of 838. This was one additional reason for the caliph to hurry back to Sāmarrā and not linger in Anatolia.

If we finally take into account the rumours that connected Theophilos with the conspiracy of ‘Abbās (to be considered in Chapter 18.1), we can safely conclude that although Mu‘taṣim returned victorious to Sāmarrā in 838, he ran many risks during his campaign. His victory reinforced Abbasid centralism for a while and put an end to the disintegrating period of the civil wars. However, he was on the brink of losing his power because of conspiracy and did not stop the emperor in his attacks on the caliphate, as we will see in Chapter 18.3. Theophilos deserves a more charitable verdict than he has received for having survived all the errors and failures of the campaign of 838.

¹⁴¹ Gordon (2001) 75–6.

¹⁴² Gordon (2001) 37–41, 50–63.

¹⁴³ Gordon (2001) 41, 80–83.

¹⁴⁴ Gordon (2001) 47–9.

Chapter 18

After Amorion: Theophilos' Last Years

18.1 The Conspiracy of 'Abbās

The Arab sources give much importance to the conspiracy of 'Abbās, the son of Ma'mūn, against the caliph Mu'taṣim in 838. Many pages of the history of Ṭabarī are devoted to explaining how the conspiracy took form during the expedition against Amorion.¹ When his father Ma'mūn died in 833, 'Abbās, despite the protests of some of his followers who hailed him by the name of caliph, gave his allegiance to Mu'taṣim, Ma'mūn's brother. He was probably trying to avoid a new dispute over the caliphate that would reproduce the civil wars of the 820s. However, disaffection grew over time between the followers of 'Abbās, who represented the Arab leaders of the Thugūr (he was the governor of these military frontierlands) as well as the Khurāsānis and Abnā' of Baghdad (the traditional supporters of the Abbasids), and the new military commanders promoted by Mu'taṣim among the Turkish soldiers, who felt a personal commitment to the new caliph.² Thus a conspiracy coalesced around 'Abbās that aimed at killing Mu'taṣim and his most loyal generals Afshīn and Ashnās.

The coup was ready by the time Mu'taṣim crossed the Cilician Gates into Byzantine territory, but 'Abbās declined to act before conquering Amorion, for he did not want to spoil the campaign. But when Mu'taṣim came back to Cilicia, after taking Amorion, the conspiracy had already been discovered by the caliph, who however did not make any move at first against 'Abbās and his supporters because of the high number of commanders involved. However, Mu'taṣim finally forced 'Abbās to confess all his plans after a copious meal in his tent. After 'Abbās had given the caliph the names of the commanders who had secretly entered into his plot, Mu'taṣim began to pursue them relentlessly. All of them were arrested and mistreated. The gruesome tortures they suffered are minutely reported by Ṭabarī. All the conspirators died as a result of these abuses, including 'Abbās himself, who died at Manbij, a city on the Euphrates. The *Book of the Sources* says that some seventy commanders were executed.³ It was certainly a slaughter which significantly weakened the caliph's army for a while. When the caliph came to Sāmarrā, 'Abbās was publicly called "The Accursed One."

¹ Ṭabarī III.11164, 1249–50 and 1256–68, trans. Bosworth (1987) 1, 112–13 and 121–34. See also Ya'qūbī, *History* 581–2.

² See Chapter 17.5 for an assessment of the increasing influence of the Turks in Mu'taṣim's army.

³ *Book of the Sources* 398.

‘Abbās’ conspiracy had mainly to do, as we said, with the opposition to the new Turkish military commanders promoted by Mu‘taṣim. But it also had ramifications in Byzantium, since ‘Abbās apparently also held some kind of negotiations with the emperor. This is clearly stated by Michael the Syrian. He reports that when Mu‘taṣim was informed about the conspiracy, he detained ‘Abbās’ secretary and his physician, a Nestorian. Both disclosed to him the details of the conspiracy, namely the persons involved, “the treaty signed with Theophilos, the emperor of the Romans” and the agreement made with the inhabitants of Baghdad, who were to take the city and massacre his enemies as soon as ‘Abbās were proclaimed caliph. Moreover, after ‘Abbās died of torture and hunger, the caliph wrote a letter proclaiming: “Everyone might know that ‘Abbās, son of Ma’mūn, has been disclosed as an enemy of our empire and that he was ready to surrender all the territory of the Ṭaiyayē [Arabs] into the hands of the Romans. Therefore, let him be accursed by everyone!”⁴

The Armenian version, which was based freely on the Syrian original, developed this account and made of the “surrender of the territory of the Arabs” a promise by ‘Abbās to embrace Christianity in exchange for the support of the Byzantines. This is of course to be ruled out,⁵ so that we must look elsewhere for the causes of the grave accusation made against ‘Abbās by his uncle Mu‘taṣim. Probably ‘Abbās wanted only to guarantee some kind of agreement with the Byzantines before killing Mu‘taṣim, for he could not risk an open confrontation with the Turkish military at Sāmarrā without having his back covered against any possible Byzantine campaign. A secret deal with the Byzantines was surely grounds enough to be accused of being a traitor to Islam. But what matters for us here is what ‘Abbās could have offered to Theophilos in exchange for peace.

That there was indeed a deal is confirmed by Mas‘ūdī, for he says that when ‘Abbās was proclaimed caliph by his supporters, “he was in correspondence with the emperor”.⁶ This is an important remark, for it appears as an independent testimony to the account of Michael the Syrian. However, no clue is given about what the intentions of ‘Abbās could have been. To come to a conclusion a general perspective is perhaps needed.

As we mentioned in Chapter 17.5, there prevailed a division in the Abbasid ruling elite between the defenders of commerce and the partisans of war as a way of financing the Abbasid state. Peter von Sivers rightly remarks that the instigators of the conspiracy of ‘Abbās were army leaders of the frontier lands “who had been given less generous support by the caliph than those of the generals of native Iranian or central Asiatic origin and consequently ended up with the dregs of the spoils”. But he then adds:

⁴ Mich. Syr. 538, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 101.

⁵ See Vasiliev (1942–1944) 204–7.

⁶ Mas‘ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold* 136–7, trans. Vasiliev (1935) 332.

During al-Mu'taṣim's reign the 'Abbāsīd ruling class was quite obviously torn between fiscal and commercial interests. The caliph himself vacillated but eventually threw his lot with the fiscal expansionists when the Byzantines mounted a military challenge against him. The proponents of commercial expansion had strong interests in a limited, defensive war and must have observed the conspiracy with delight, if indeed they were not directly behind it. Although the conspiracy failed, the commercial party nevertheless emerged triumphant over its fiscal rival: it succeeded in forcing the departure of the military expansionists from the Thughūr. For the time being the war of attrition was interrupted.⁷

Was 'Abbās really a supporter of commercial interests as Sivers suggests? We are not sure about it, but his prolonged command of ten years in the frontier lands of the Thughūr, from the time Ma'mūn appointed him in 828 until his death in 838, perhaps made him sensitive to the advantages of a commercial understanding with the Byzantines. He was not the only person in the Thughūr who was ready to come to an agreement with the enemy, for some of the conspirators during the Amorion campaign declared that they considered it easier to go over to the Byzantines than to obey the orders of Mu'taṣim's commanders.⁸ It is perhaps from this perspective that the friendship between 'Abbās and Manuel the Armenian, referred to in the Byzantine sources (see Chapter 5.4), makes sense. As a man of the frontier, 'Abbās had learnt to understand his rival and to hear complaints about the central government in Iraq. This could have been presented to the Byzantines as an occasion for a diplomatic approach to the son of the caliph. The move could have started as early as in 831–832, when Theophilos wrote to the caliph Ma'mūn proposing an agreement between the two powers that could not but favour commerce and trade:

I have written to you inviting you to make a peace agreement and as one desirous of the advantage of a truce in military operations, so that you may remove the burdens of war from upon us and so that we may be to each other friends and a band of associates, in addition to the accruing of benefits and widened scope for trading through commercial outlets, the release of those who have been carried off into captivity and the security of the highways and heartlands of the realms.⁹

This offer, rejected by Ma'mūn, was not necessarily evidence of Theophilos' weakness, as it may appear, but rather an attempt to create divisions among the Abbasid ruling elite between the opposed tendencies of the fiscal expansionists and defenders of trade and commerce. The obsessions of Ma'mūn with the

⁷ Sivers (1982) 80.

⁸ Ṭabarī III.1249–50, trans. Bosworth (1991) 112–13.

⁹ Ṭabarī III.1109–10, trans. Bosworth (1987) 195, probably taken from Ibn Ṭayfūr 284–5, trans. Keller (1908) vol. 2, 128–9.

Byzantine Empire and his apocalyptic fears perhaps hindered any approach during his lifetime (see Chapter 22), but as long as ‘Abbās remained in charge at the frontier, the emperor could have hoped for some kind of rapprochement.

Although it was Mu‘taṣim, and not ‘Abbās, who was hailed as caliph at the death of Ma‘mūn in 833, the new caliph seemed initially to avoid war against Byzantium. But under the pressure of the increasingly bold military actions of the Byzantines in northern Syria and western Armenia between 834 and 837, Mu‘taṣim decided to lead for the last time a massive campaign against Byzantium. After it was over and Amorion remained plundered, it must have appeared to the Byzantines that some new diplomatic impulse was needed if they really wanted to prevent further massive attacks against their territory. Military actions were of course not excluded, as we shall see below, but they were complemented by an intensive diplomatic exchange that was unparalleled thus far. New allies were looked for in the most distant regions to fight the Abbasids.

18.2 Diplomacy in the West ...

On the other side of the Mediterranean, the Cordoba emirate of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān was first contacted by the Byzantines after the defeat of Amorion. A very interesting letter from the Umayyad emir of al-Andalus to the emperor Theophilos has been preserved in the *Muqtabis* of the Andalusian historian Ibn Ḥayyān (988–1076), whose only manuscript seemed lost for decades after Lévi-Provençal consulted it in the 1930s.¹⁰ However, the exemplar has been recently acquired by the Spanish Real Academia de la Historia, where it is now deposited, from the legacy of the Arabist Emilio García Gómez.¹¹ We now have an excellent facsimile edition,¹² a partial edition with Spanish translation,¹³ and a complete Spanish translation with commentary on this important text.¹⁴

Ibn Ḥayyān has preserved three different accounts of the embassy of Theophilos. The first is a lengthy literary re-creation of the embassy made by the Andalusian poet Ghazāl and a certain Yaḥyā al-Munayqila to the court of the emperor.¹⁵ The account is apparently based on the personal experiences of the poet, who expresses his disgust at making such a long journey to the distant lands of a Christian sovereign. Despite his protests, the emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān obliges him to do so, providing Ghazāl with generous financial support for the journey and money for his family during his absence. A long series of anecdotes interwoven with poems follows, making a vivid and witty report of Ghazāl’s long

¹⁰ Lévi-Provençal (1937).

¹¹ For the circumstances of the recovery of the lost manuscript see Marin (1999).

¹² Vallvé Bermejo (1999).

¹³ Vallvé Bermejo and Ruiz Girela (2003).

¹⁴ Makki and Corriente (2001).

¹⁵ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, 158v–163v, trans. Makki and Corriente (2001) 228–44.

journey, as expected from his literary skill. We do not have an official report, but a succession of impressions conceived to entertain the reader. Leaving aside the poems preceding his departure and following his return, which are not especially informative for our concern here, the scenes recorded at the imperial court are intended to show Ghazāl's wit in front of the imperial pair. Thus, for example, when he is to enter the throne room through a very low door, which could be done only by kneeling, he avoids the humiliation of the proskynesis by turning his back to the emperor who was waiting for him. Or when he is rebuked by Theophilos for stealing a golden cup from the imperial table and hiding it under his mantle, he feigns being disappointed by the meanness of the Byzantine customs compared with those observed at the table of the caliphs, who allow the ambassadors to keep for themselves table service items; Theophilos has no other option than to present his guest with the cup. These and similar anecdotes (dealing for example with circumcision or the drinking of wine) have a literary or folkloric background¹⁶ and are effective in presenting the witty Andalusian prevailing over the pompous ceremonial of the Byzantines.

The narrator takes evident satisfaction in presenting Ghazāl as victorious in front of all the challenges he confronted. In this literary account the embassy turns into a propagandistic tool for the benefit of the Muslim ambassador, who acts as a representative of the Cordoban Umayyads. As a consequence, we get much precious information about the distance and diffidence toward the Byzantines felt by the western Muslims and learn very little about the actual objectives of the embassy or their implementation. The account says only that Ghazāl and his companion departed from Byzantium for Cordoba in HA 225 (12 November 839 to 30 October 840);¹⁷ that he was rewarded with valuable presents by the Byzantine emperor;¹⁸ that he delivered a "secret message" to the emperor;¹⁹ and that the empress helped Ghazāl in persuading the emperor to grant "all the objectives that were difficult" to attain.²⁰ These last indications are so general that they must be approached with prudence. A first warning about the reliability of the account comes from the mention of the young prince, son of the imperial couple, who pays a visit to the poet and offers him a wineskin. Considering the date, only Michael III could be referred to, but as he was born in 840, he must have been a baby of some months when Ghazāl was in Constantinople.

There is however an important detail that has remained unknown until now. It is the mention of a previous ambassador to Constantinople. Ghazāl recommends him again for the mission in a long *qasida* written for the occasion, for he says that the man has enough experience as he dealt with Christians as a youth, was

¹⁶ See for that Signes Codoñer (2001). For instance, the anecdote of the golden cup appears in the Alexander romance of Pseudo-Kallisthenes, ed. Thiel (1974) 85 (ch. II.5).

¹⁷ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, 162r, trans. Makki and Corriente (2001) 239.

¹⁸ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, 162r, trans. Makki and Corriente (2001) 240.

¹⁹ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, 160v, trans. Makki and Corriente (2001) 236.

²⁰ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, 161r, trans. Makki and Corriente (2001) 237.

wealthy and learned, and had had contact with persons of some standing.²¹ This information suggests that the Byzantine embassy to Cordoba was perhaps sent as a response to a previous one coming from the Andalusian emir.

The second account preserved by Ibn Ḥayyān is a short item copied later in the *Muqtabis* and transmitted by the Cordoban historian Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn Mufarrij al-Qubbasī (959–1038).²² There, it is said that Theophilos sent a letter to the emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān “taking the initiative of re-establishing diplomatic relations” with the Umayyads, interrupted since the rise in power of the Abbasids. Theophilos apparently recognized the rights of the Cordoban emir to the caliphate and urged him to recover them by fighting the Abbasids. It is said that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān was pleased with the message sent by the emperor and showered attentions on his ambassador. He then sent in turn two ambassadors back to Constantinople, the poet Ghazāl and Yaḥyā al-Munayqila. Both effectively travelled to the emperor and, after some experiences, happily returned to their homeland having signed “a pact of friendship” between the two powers.

The third account is transmitted by ‘Isā ibn Aḥmad al-Razī (888–955), one of the first Arab historians born in al-Andalus. It is copied immediately after the one transmitted by Ibn Mufarrij al-Qubbasī. It also contains a short summary of the embassy whereby we are informed that the Byzantine ambassador Qurṭiyūs (probably Καρτερός) arrived at Cordoba in HA 225 with magnificent presents and a letter from Theophilos demanding that the emir establish diplomatic relations. The emperor is said to have “neglected the dishonour of taking the initiative” in such a matter and to be “the first Christian sovereign” who sought to deal officially with Cordoba. Theophilos apparently extolled in his letter the importance of the Andalusian emirate and accompanied it with valuable presents. The emir responded to the presents as was fitting and wrote to the emperor a reply which was sent to Constantinople by “his two master astrologers” Ghazāl and Yaḥyā al-Munayqila.

After that, the complete text of the original letter sent to Theophilos follows.²³ In it the emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān refers first to the former friendship between the Umayyads and Byzantines as the cause that moved him to respond to the embassy of Qurṭiyūs. He thus confirms his will to seal a pact of friendship between the two powers. After this short preamble, the emir gives a minute rendering of all the points mentioned in Theophilos’ letter. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān declares first to have understood what Theophilos wrote to him condemning the Abbasid usurpation of

²¹ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, 158v–159r, trans. Makki and Corriente (2001) 229–31. The name of this ambassador is not easy to ascertain because the text seems to be corrupted at this place. The translators suggest Ibn Abī Ṭilbah, but this could have been a nickname.

²² Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, 180r, trans. Makki and Corriente (2001) 294.

²³ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, 180r–181v, trans. Makki and Corriente (2001) 294–8; for an edition of the text of the letter from ‘Abd al-Raḥmān with a French translation see Lévi-Provençal (1937); for a comment on it see Signes Codoñer (2004a) 199–208.

the caliphate in 749 and the slaughter of the Umayyads in 750. He also obviously joins him in his condemnation of the Abbasid caliphs Ma'mūn and Mu'taṣim, who are presented as heretics and bad rulers oppressing their people and are disrespectfully called by the names of their mothers. Then the emir mentions the vows made by Theophilos regarding the swift end of Abbasid rule and the re-establishment of the Umayyad caliphate "as is proclaimed by the books, the prophets declare, is conferred by the consensus (of the doctors) and argument concedes" (see also Chapter 22 for a comment on this passage). Theophilos is said to urge the caliph to march against the Abbasids and to promise to come to his aid, "as the friend does with the friend". 'Abd al-Raḥmān then says that he has read and understood everything the emperor told him about the "conduct of Abū Ḥafṣ and his men, who migrated from our country", for they seized a part of the empire and declared loyalty to the Abbasids. The same goes for the emirs of Africa, who according to Theophilos' letter "have parted from Ibn Mārida [Mu'taṣim], paying no further obedience to him and feeling weariness of his dynasty".

The Cordoban then agrees to make an alliance between the two powers as was customary for their forerunners. 'Abd al-Raḥmān adds that the caliph Abū Ja'far (754–775) has already been adequately rewarded for his iniquity against the Umayyads and is suffering endless torments by sentence of God. Regarding the project to campaign against the Abbasids and the impending end of their dynasty and re-establishment of the Umayyads, the emir replies that he is waiting for that according to the will of God. He is confident that with His help he will succeed in putting Syria and al-Andalus under the same banner, for news is continuously coming to his ears announcing that the revenge of the Umayyads will fall upon them and "they will die in a bad hour at the hands of the people of the West". He then mentions that the Andalusian followers of Abū Ḥafṣ are only the "dregs of the populace and depraved wanderers" who acted on their own behalf without any support from Cordoba and were forced to submit to Mu'taṣim by the proximity of the Abbasids. 'Abd al-Raḥmān hopes that Theophilos is strong enough to banish them from the part of the empire they have taken and only if he succeeds in recovering the east will he help Theophilos in this task, in the interest of both of them. The emir finishes the letter mentioning the sending of two ambassadors back to Theophilos along with his envoy Qurṭiyūs. He closes with the following sentence: "Write to us through their agency on the matter you wrote to us about, as well as on good news from you and the good health we wish you, in order to consider whatever both (ambassadors) bring from your part, as they carry it, if God wills it."

Only the dating connects this diplomatic correspondence between Cordoba and Constantinople with the campaign of 838 and the sack of Amorion, for the Byzantine ambassador Karteros could already have arrived at Cordoba in 839. However, the chronology is not quite clear, for HA 225 is indeed mentioned as the year when the envoy of Constantinople arrived at Cordoba, but also when Ghazāl departed from Constantinople back to Cordoba. If we give credence to the aforementioned *qasida* of Ghazāl, even a first embassy to Theophilos could have

come to Constantinople preceding the diplomatic exchange we are considering here. In any case, whether the correspondence between Constantinople and Cordoba was initiated as a direct result of the campaign of 838 or not, the sack of Amorion probably led Theophilos to conduct an unprecedented diplomatic initiative in the Islamic west, either making the first advance without any previous contact being made, or just profiting from the arrival of a first embassy from Cordoba to Constantinople, previous to the one led by Ghazāl.

The purpose of the embassy must have been ambitious. If the rights of the Umayyads to the caliphate were now upheld by Theophilos and wishes for its re-establishment expressed, it was certainly not just because he wanted to flatter his correspondent, but because he expected to gain something from a common alliance. This could appear unrealistic for we are considering the facts *ex eventu* and know that long life still awaited the Abbasid caliphate. However, as we shall consider in Chapter 22, many prophecies announced the end of the Abbasid caliphate at this time and even Ma'mūn seems to have given credence to them. These prophecies are mentioned by 'Abd al-Raḥmān in his letter. Accordingly, we cannot exclude that some kind of expectations about an impending end of the Abbasids fostered the correspondence between the two powers and even laid the foundations for a pact of friendship. However, this does not mean that Theophilos expected direct intervention from the Andalusians in the east. The two specific scenarios expressly mentioned in the letter, Crete and Africa, speak clearly of the limited scope of the alliance.

About Crete 'Abd al-Raḥmān had apparently little to say, for he declares he has neither ascendancy over the Andalusian Cretans nor the capacity for military intervention in the area. Thus only promises are given for the case of a future re-establishment of the Umayyad caliphate in the east. 'Abd al-Raḥmān showed himself to be unconcerned about the fate of the Andalusians who took Crete, and this would have been welcomed by the Byzantines, who tried to avoid new emigrants coming to Crete to reinforce the Andalusians already settled there, and perhaps also wanted to know first hand the causes behind their arrival in the east.

The Continuator wrote historical excursus about famine and overpopulation in al-Andalus as a cause for the emigration of the Andalusians to the east. This report, albeit somewhat badly summarized and with confused geographical notions, appears to be based on some local source directly acquainted with what was actually happening.²⁴ It is possible that the Byzantines got this information during Karteros' embassy to Cordoba in 839. If this Karteros was the same person as the homonymous admiral who unsuccessfully tried to recover the island from the Andalusians during the reign of Michel II,²⁵ then his interest in recovering Crete does not need to be explained. We know through the *De administrando imperio* that Byzantine envoys or ambassadors on missions to foreign lands wrote this kind of historical or ethnographical report. The parallel case is perhaps provided

²⁴ Th. Cont. III.21 (73.13–74.6). See Signes Codoñer (2004a) 196–8 and Chapter 13.3.

²⁵ For Karteros and the date of the expedition see Signes Codoñer (1995) 323–8.

by Petronas during his mission among the Khazars at probably the same time, as we shall see in Chapter 19.

But what then of Africa? Apparently the question about Africa remains unanswered by 'Abd al-Rahmān. But if we pay close attention to his text, the emir, when replying to Theophilos' proposals, does mention indeed that (I translate literally) "concerning the matter of this wickedness of Ibn Marida [Mu'taṣim], you urged against him to make an attack on what lay before him (*al-khurūj ilā mā qiblahu*)". Lévi-Provençal rendered the passage as "an attack against the borders of his lands".²⁶ It appears that an attack against the Aghlabids of Africa could have been referred to, for Africa lay "before" the main lands of the caliphate in a hypothetical march eastwards from al-Andalus. Such an attack seemed realistic from many points of view and would have been welcome to the empire.

As a matter of fact, since the 820s Byzantium had been greatly affected by the Arab invasion of western Sicily, exactly at the same time as the Andalusians took hold of Crete. Since the capture of Palermo in 831 at the beginning of the reign of Theophilos, the Byzantines had not been able to recover the city and were on the defensive against the repeated attacks of the African and Andalusian warriors. However, only the arrival of Alexios Mousele to Sicily in 837 (for him, see Chapter 7.2) reveals for the first time a direct interest of Constantinople in redressing the situation on the island. Evidence of the secondary importance of Sicily until this time and even during the whole reign of Theophilos lies in the absolute silence of the Greek authors on the continuous warfare there in the 830s of which we are informed only through Arab sources.²⁷ It appears that since the rebellion of Euphemios during the reign of Michael II the interest in Sicily dwindled to a local matter.

Things perhaps changed in 838 with the taking and plundering by the Arabs of the city of Brindisi, a Longobard possession which lay to the north of the Byzantine territory at the heel of the Italian peninsula. It was a bold action by the Arabs, who in previous years had increasingly raided south Italy and even sealed a pact with the important city of Naples, whose dukes theoretically acknowledged Byzantine sovereignty but in fact acted in their own interest, trading (probably with slaves) with the Muslim foe.²⁸ With this attack on Brindisi the danger of further Arab inroads into the Adriatic Sea first became evident. It was a serious warning for the Byzantines, who realized that the Arabs could eventually take hold of parts of the Italian peninsula before even completing their conquest of eastern Sicily. Moreover, not only was the communication of Byzantium with southern Italy and Sicily seriously threatened, but also the traditional influence of Byzantium

²⁶ For the passage and the translation see Lévi-Provençal (1937) 19 and 22. Makki and Corriente (2001) 297 translate the passage as follows: "En cuanto a lo que dices del malvado Ibn Māridah, incitándonos a salir contra él."

²⁷ Vasiliev (1935) vol. 1, 127–37 and 143–4.

²⁸ For a history of Byzantine Italy see Gay (1917), Falkenhausen (1978), Guillou et al. (1983), Kreutz (1991) and Cosentino (2008)..

over Sardinia and the Balearics could also soon come to an end. Sardinia was in fact a strategic island in the middle of the western Mediterranean base, which remained in close contact with Byzantium until the very beginning of the eleventh century, even using the Greek alphabet to write its local dialect.²⁹ The Balearics, close to the eastern coast of the Iberian peninsula, had never been captured from the Byzantines by the Visigoths. They remained de facto independent before the Muslims and probably in the orbit of Byzantine political *oikoumene* to which they were connected through Sardinia (see Map 8).³⁰



Map 8 West and central Mediterranean Sea, c. 838

As we see, a long chain of “Byzantine” outposts beginning in the Italian heel and ending in Ibiza was in danger if the entrance to the Adriatic was not secured against Muslim inroads. After the increasing difficulties Byzantium had in defending its western areas of influence, in 848–849, only some years after the death of Theophilos, ‘Abd al-Rahmān attacked for the first time the Balearics in order to annex them to the emirate.³¹ Although the expedition ended without results in the long term, it anticipated the final assault and conquest of the islands at the end of the ninth century, soon after the fall of Taormina in Sicily.³²

²⁹ For ‘Byzantine’ Sardinia see Corrias and Cosentino (2002).

³⁰ For the links of Byzantium with the Balearics see Signes Codoñer (2005).

³¹ Amengual i Batle (1991) 463–7.

³² Signes Codoñer (2007a).

An alliance with the Byzantines against the Aghlabids was also convenient for the Spanish Umayyads, who had always been interested in controlling the North African coast and the straits. Conversely, a powerful emirate in Africa with a bridgehead in western Sicily could isolate the Umayyad emirate in the west Mediterranean basin from the rest of Islam. The same conjuncture was reproduced in the first half of the tenth century with the emergence of the Shi'ite Fatimite caliphate in North Africa. This situation then led to the conversion of the Umayyad emirate into a Sunni caliphate and to a naval alliance with the Byzantines. It was around 956 that the Byzantine and the Umayyad fleets converged off the African coast to fight the common foe.³³ Now, if we read attentively the letter of 'Abd al-Rahmān, Theophilos appears to suggest to the Umayyad that the Aghlabids might change sides and ally with them, for he notices that the African emirate no longer pays obedience to the Abbasids and is dissatisfied with their rule. This early crisis between the Aghlabids and their Abbasid master, as expressed in the letter, appears suspect to some scholars, but there is no reason to question the authenticity of the letter in this regard.³⁴ The possibility of turning the Aghlabid emirate from its fidelity to Baghdad might perhaps not have appeared so remote in the eyes of the contemporaries.

That Theophilos was interested in an alliance against the African Aghlabids is further evidenced by other sources. As early as 838, Theophilos had sent an embassy to the court of Louis the Pious, who received it at Ingelheim on 18 May 839.³⁵ The *Annales Bertiniani* report only that the Greek ambassadors, Theodosios metropolitan of Chalkedon and the spatharios Theophanes, proposed an alliance of friendship between the two powers and congratulated the Frankish emperor on his latest victories.³⁶ Although the *Annales* remain silent about the objectives of the embassy, it is not hard to guess that they were somehow connected with the Muslim invasions, either in Sicily and/or in Anatolia.

Theophilos had already sent another embassy to the Frankish emperor Louis I in 833,³⁷ but the ambassador arrived at the worst possible moment, for Louis' son Lothair had just led a revolt of the three elder sons of the emperor and taken the place of Louis, who had been deposed. The Byzantine ambassador, Markos, archbishop of Ephesos, could only deliver some presents to Lothair but was not even able to meet personally the deposed Louis. He returned to Constantinople "referring to

³³ See Stern (1950), Halm (1991) 392–6 and Signes Codoñer (2004a) 237–9.

³⁴ Signes Codoñer (2004a) 204–5.

³⁵ Müller (2009) Regest 438. See Chapter 20.1 for dating the departure of the embassy from Constantinople.

³⁶ *Annales Bertiniani* 19–20 (anno 839), trans. Nelson (1991) 42–3. Treadgold (1988) 309 and note 425 wrongly applies to this embassy the information provided by Byzantine historians about a second embassy sent in 841 (for which see below). For the problem see Signes Codoñer (1995) 575–82. See also Shepard (1995) 41–4 for a more accurate rendering of the details.

³⁷ Müller (2009) Regest 429.

this almost unheard-of tragedy” (tragediam reportantem pene inauditam).³⁸ Again, nothing is said about the motives of this early embassy. However, since it should have departed from Constantinople in the summer, it had probably to do with the invasion of Ma’mūn, who entered Byzantine territory on 9 July 833 leading the largest army assembled until then during his reign (see Chapter 14.7). It appears that Theophilos was looking for some help against the Arab invasion of 833 when he sent his embassy to Louis. Nothing precludes us from thinking the same about the embassy of 839.

Nevertheless, the increasing attacks of the Muslims in Sicily and Italy in the last years of Theophilos’ reign were by themselves grounds enough for a Byzantine embassy to the west. In fact, the Arabs took Taranto from the Longobards in 839 and continued their raids deep into the Adriatic. Theodosios Baboutzikos,³⁹ Theodora’s brother-in-law and brother of Constantine Baboutzikos (taken captive at Amorion),⁴⁰ was sent by Theophilos to Venice in 840 to prepare a naval offensive against the Arabs, as is expressly stated by Latin chronicles.⁴¹ The offensive, directed against the Muslim leader Sabas at Taranto, failed, for the Venetian fleet was defeated and its crew captured by the Muslims. After that, the invaders even plundered the Dalmatian coast and Ancona in retaliation for the Venetian expedition.⁴² At the same time, a number of small forts in western Sicily surrendered to the Arabs.⁴³

This escalation of the conflict explains a new embassy to the Frankish court, which set off from Constantinople in 841, when the emperor was already Louis’ son, Lothair.⁴⁴ Several Latin sources refer to this embassy and particularly to the intention of the Byzantine emperor to marry a daughter of his to the son of the emperor, king Louis of Italy. When the embassy was received at Treveris by the Frankish emperor in 842 (probably in the summer), Theophilos was already dead. Nevertheless, a betrothal between his daughter and Louis of Italy was apparently agreed, for the Byzantines demanded the fulfilment of the wedding some years later.⁴⁵

Again, nothing is said in these sources about supposed military objectives against Muslim raiders coming from Africa. However, Byzantine historians this

³⁸ Astronomus, *Vita Hludowici* 636. See also *Annales Bertiniani* 7 (anno 833).

³⁹ *PmbZ* #7874 and *PBE* s.v. “Theodosios 41”. For the embassy see McCormick (2001) 226–8, 920 and Shepard (1995) 46–58.

⁴⁰ *PmbZ* #3932 and *PBE* s.v. “Konstantinos 30”.

⁴¹ Andreas Dandolo, *Chronica* 175 (Muratori) and 150.21–23 (Pastorello); John the Deacon, *Chronicle* 17.37–41.

⁴² Andreas Dandolo, *Chronica* 175 (Muratori) and 150.24–31 (Pastorello); John the Deacon, *Chronicle* 17.41–18.6; *Chronicle of Salerno* 508–9.

⁴³ Vasiliev (1935) vol. 1, 177–83 and Treadgold (1988) 320–21 and note 441.

⁴⁴ Müller (2009) Regest 443.

⁴⁵ Andreas Dandolo, *Chronica* 175 (Muratori) and 151.2–4 (Pastorello); *Continuatio constantinopolitana* 343; *Annales Bertiniani* 28 (anno 842) and 43 (anno 853); and Lothair’s edict of the year 842, edited in Beyer (1860–1874) vol. 1, 77–8 with the number 69, where the emperor mentions the reception of this embassy in Treveris.

time provide complementary information about the embassy.⁴⁶ The Continuator mentions that Theophilos sent the patrician Theodosios Baboutzikos on an embassy “to the king of France” (πρὸς τὸν ῥῆγα Φραγγίας) after the defeat of Amorion demanding military forces (στρατεύματα ἐκεῖ ... αἰτῶν γενναῖά τε καὶ πολυάνθρωπα). He adds that the emperor would have campaigned anew against the Saracens if his envoy had not died unexpectedly, “for his death prevented that this army arrived at the capital” (ἐκείνου τε γὰρ ἡ ἀποβίωσις τὸν στρατὸν ἐκείνον πρὸς τὴν βασιλεύουσαν ἐλθεῖν οὐ πεποίηκε). The death of the emperor because of dysentery is said to have prevented the fulfilment of the project. Genesios also links this embassy with the defeat of Amorion and mentions Theodosios Baboutzikos as the ambassador to the king of France. He then specifies that the objective of the embassy was “to recruit a large army as an auxiliary force for him and that some of his officers plundered some of the cities and lands of the Sarracenes that lay between Libya and Asia” (τοῦ κατ’ ἐπικουρίαν συνθέσθαι αὐτῷ πολυάνθρωπον στράτευμα, καὶ τινας ὑποστρατήγων αὐτοῦ χωρῶν τε καὶ πόλεων τινος Σαρακηνικῶν τῶν μεταξὺ Λιβύης καὶ Ἀσίας καταληΐσασθαι).

If we combine the accounts of the Continuator and Genesios, then Theophilos, after the defeat at Amorion, would have demanded that the Frankish emperor send western soldiers to Constantinople to fight the Muslims either in Asia (Syria?) or in Africa (Egypt?). As Baboutzikos was not the ambassador in 839 and the embassy failed because of the death both of Baboutzikos (alive in 840 when he was sent to the Venetians)⁴⁷ and of the emperor, there is every reason to identify this embassy with the one that was received at the Frankish court in 842. Had death not prevented the fulfilment of Theophilos' project, it would have brought about a substantial change in the relations between the Christian powers facing the threat of Islam. But were these indeed Theophilos' plans or are the Byzantine chronicles (dependent on a common source) exaggerating the purpose of the embassy?

Additional evidence may be gained from a small fragment of papyrus, coming from the abbey of Saint Denis and preserved today in Paris, which contains the final part of an original letter sent by a Byzantine emperor to his Frankish colleague. The Greek text, damaged on its margins, is difficult to read. However, there the Byzantine emperor clearly urges his addressee to carry out some plans of his, so that his proposed “restoration” (ἀποκατάστασις) would “arrive at the limits of the Christians” (εἰς τὰ πέρατα τῶν χριστιανῶν φθάνη), the foes be destroyed (ὄλονται) and the friends rescued (οἱ φίλοι σώζονται). The addressee is said to be able “to issue orders” (ἐγκελεύειν) to “our son the king” (ἡμῶν τέκνῳ τῷ ῥηγί) for implementing these plans, for he was appointed by God as his tutor (ἐπίτροπος).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Th. Cont. III.37 (135.1–15) and Gen. III.16 (50.13–18).

⁴⁷ It is significant that the Latin sources do not mention the name of the Greek ambassador in 842, though they do in 839 and 833. This could confirm the indication in the Continuator that Baboutzikos died before meeting the Frankish emperor.

⁴⁸ See Dölger (1950) and Ohnsorge (1955) for the edition of the fragment and Müller (2009) Regest 413 for further bibliography.

Although the Muslims are not named, a campaign against them is implicit in the text, which is full of references to God's favour. More difficult to ascertain is what the text meant by a restoration that should reach "the limits of the Christians". Nevertheless, it is clearly the Christians living outside the Christian states (and accordingly under Muslim rule) to whom this restoration applies. Sicily could have been a target, for the Christians living in the western part of the island were subjects of the Muslim lords coming from Aghlabid Africa. But did the Sicilian Christians represent in fact the limits of Christianity? Or is it the Christians living in Syria or Palestine who are referred to here? From the point of view of a Byzantine, the second option would perhaps be the expected one. This would make an identification of the Saint Denis letter with the text sent by the Byzantine embassy of 841–842 more likely, considering what the Byzantine historians wrote about Theophilos' objectives.

Franz Dölger suggested that the Byzantine emperor was Theophilos and the addressee the emperor Lothair, who was urged by the Byzantine to convince his son, Louis king of Italy, to participate actively in a military campaign to the borders of Christianity. The fact that the "son" was addressed as "king" and not as "emperor" led Dölger to suggest a period in which the Frankish emperor had a son ruling as king in Italy. Michael McCormick has recently called into question this view,⁴⁹ arguing that a co-emperor could also have been treated as a king by the Byzantine emperor, who did not even shrink from using the Greco-Latin word "rex" for emperor Louis the Pious in 824, if we accept the Latin inscriptio preserved, addressing Louis as "glorioso regi Francorum et Langobardorum, et vocato eorum imperatori".⁵⁰ McCormick further argued that the finding of the original piece of papyrus in the abbey of Saint Denis made much more sense if we admitted that this embassy was the one received by Louis the Pious in 827 at nearby Compiègne,⁵¹ rather than the one led initially by Baboutzikos and departing from Constantinople in 841, for this was received by Lothair at Treveris. This was also the embassy carrying the famous manuscript of the work of Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite, also preserved in the abbey (cod. Par. gr. 437). Finally, McCormick mentions that in 827 count Bonifatius, prefect of Corsica appointed by Louis the Pious, led a military campaign against the Aghlabid coast, landing between Utica and Carthage. He defeated the Muslims in several encounters before he sailed back to Corsica.⁵² This campaign might have been the consequence of the petition addressed to the emperor asking him to attack the Muslims, for Bonifatius acted in cooperation with the Sardinians, close allies of Byzantium.

McCormick's interpretation is appealing, although none of the sources of the embassy of 827 mentions that the two powers agreed on a military campaign against

⁴⁹ McCormick (2005).

⁵⁰ *Letter to Louis the Pious* 475.31–32.

⁵¹ Müller (2009) Regest 413.

⁵² Astronomus, *Vita Hludowici* 632.

the Arabs. Only the ratification of the pact of 824 is expressly referred to.⁵³ This argument *ex silentio* certainly does not invalidate McCormick's hypothesis, but it does not confirm it either. On the other hand, although the landing of Bonifatius in Africa with Sardinian support might have perhaps required the acquiescence of Constantinople, the ambitious restoration of Christian power alluded to in the letter of Saint Denis tallies better with the embassy of 841–842, if we believe the Byzantine sources. It was only the unexpected deaths of the ambassador and the emperor that prevented the fulfilment of these plans. Moreover, an appeal to the Franks for military help appears better motivated in 841, given the critical situation in Sicily and the Muslim raids in the Adriatic, than in 827, when the usurpation of Euphemios had just begun and Byzantium could hardly yet have assessed its lasting consequences.⁵⁴ It appears therefore that the continuous fighting against the pirates, who had been raiding the Balearics, Corsica and Sardinia since the very beginning of the century,⁵⁵ was the real cause of the alliance of count Bonifatius with the Sardinians to attack the African base. In fact, the *Life of Louis the Pious* says that it was after Bonifatius could not find (Muslims) pirates in his patrolling of the seas that he decided to land in Sardinia and to demand the support of the island for an expedition against Africa.⁵⁶

Therefore the best argument in support of McCormick's dating is the fact that the piece of papyrus with the Byzantine letter was preserved for centuries in Saint Denis, near Compiègne, where Louis received the embassy of 841. If the letter of Saint Denis had been sent in 841, we would need to explain how it could have made the journey from Treveris, where the Byzantine embassy was received in 842, to the French abbey. However, it is not to be excluded that a person linked to the abbey and present at the reception of the Byzantine embassy at Treveris could have later brought the document to Saint Denis. Daniel Sonzogni, who recently published a detailed study of the archive of the abbey, was of this opinion.⁵⁷ Certainly, evidence is lacking about how documents arrived at Saint Denis, but this does not mean that this important abbey collected them only from the immediate area.⁵⁸

⁵³ *Annales regni Francorum* 174: "propter foedus confirmandum".

⁵⁴ The letter was expedited in May from Constantinople, for ματῶρ is still readable in the lower end of the papyrus of Saint Denis. Accordingly, it should have been sent in May 827 if we follow McCormick's suggestion.

⁵⁵ See Manzano Moreno (1998) 215–20 and Signes Codoñer (2004a) 177–82.

⁵⁶ Astronomus, *Vita Hludowici* 632: "dum pyratas maria pervagando requirit et non invenit, sibi Sardorum insulam amicorum appulit".

⁵⁷ Sonzogni (2003) 172–5.

⁵⁸ See also Fried (2006) for St Denis as the centre where the *Donatio Constantini* was forged c. 830–833. Hilduin, probably the author of the forgery and abbot of St Denis since 815, was appointed by Louis the Pious his personal chaplain c. 819–822, remaining close to the emperor until his death, except for the period between 830–831, during the war between the emperor and his sons. He could have easily had access to the imperial chancellery, as he had helped to complete the Carolingian Reichsannalen. Montinaro (2011) has suggested

Be this as it may, a project for a common campaign of Franks and Byzantines against the Muslims was envisaged by Theophilos in his last years, if we believe what the Continuator and Genesios say about the emperor's last embassy. The embassy to 'Abd al-Raḥmān confirms that Theophilos was devising an overall strategy for the Mediterranean with the ambitious aim of establishing a new balance of power and putting the Abbasids on the defensive. It seems probable that Theophilos did not content himself with sporadic naval attacks against the Muslim raiders coming from Aghlabid Africa, such as the ones Venetia made with his help after the capture of Taranto. He conceived more ambitious projects and tried to connect in some way the west and east in a common policy against the Abbasids. However, his premature death prevented him from further developing his plans. In any case, to label Theophilos' project as a crusade against Islam, as Dölger and Ohnsorge did some time ago, is unfounded, especially considering that Theophilos approached the Umayyad emir of Cordoba as a potential ally against the Aghlabids and Abbasids. The dealings of the Neapolitans with the Muslim merchants also prove that the lines between Islam and Christianity were not so clear-cut at the time.

18.3 ... and War in the East

After the massive campaign of caliph Mu'taṣim against Ankyra and Amorion in 838, neither the Arab nor the Greek sources mention any further military clash between the Abbasids and the Byzantines for the final three years in which Theophilos remained in power, for the emperor had already died on 20 January 842,⁵⁹ some days after Mu'taṣim did, on 5 January 842. This lack of military records is not necessarily proof of the non-existence of any military at the time, but perhaps just a consequence of the absence of either the caliph or the emperor at the expeditions that could have taken place during the years 839–841. In fact, it was the presence of either or both of them in previous campaigns that explains the many accounts and details we have at our disposal for the years 830, 831, 832, 833, 835, 837 and 838, of which enough has been said in earlier chapters.

Nevertheless, Michael the Syrian has preserved some short accounts about military operations on the Byzantine–Abbasid border for this period, which are worth considering here, for he is our only source for them. The reliability of the account of Michael the Syrian is very high because his source is the chronicle of the Jacobite patriarch Dionysios of Tell Mahrē (818–845), a direct witness of the

instead that the letter was in fact a request for military aid against Robert Guiscard sent by Alexios Komnenos to the French king Philip I on 6 May 1081 and considers that it was the abbot Suger, schoolmate and later regent of Philip's son Louis VI, who is to be held responsible for the presence of the papyrus in Saint Denis. The dating, as it appears, goes against the previous consensus of scholars and paleographers, and is highly questionable.

⁵⁹ Th. Cont. III.41 (139.4–6) and Gen. III.22 (54.10–12).

events. Michael expressly mentions that Dionysios' chronicle is his main source of the accounts until the death of Theophilos and Mu'tašim. He even copies the colophon and final discourse with which Dionysios closed his work.⁶⁰

The first military action Michael transmits is a summary account of an expedition into Byzantine territory led by Abū Sa'īd, who had been appointed governor of Mesopotamia (Jazīra) and Syria after the execution of 'Abbās, the son of Ma'mūn, in 838. Abū Sa'īd's army was divided in two contingents, one commanded by himself and the other by the general Bashīr with the people of Mopsuestia. Although the contingent of Bashīr took many Roman captives, the Khurramite Našr and his men encountered and defeated them, releasing the prisoners. Nevertheless, the general Abū Sa'īd finally succeeded in killing Našr, who is presented by Michael as the leader of the Khurramites. The main focus of the account is on Našr, whose salted head is sent to the caliph.⁶¹

This attack, which followed the major expedition of 838 against Amorion, probably happened in 839.⁶² It proves by itself that caliph Mu'tašim exerted pressure against the Byzantines even after the massive campaign of the previous year, but now not through personal expeditions, as had been the case for the years 830, 832, 833 and 838, but on a lesser scale, through Syrian and Mesopotamian contingents.

Seizing booty appears as a main objective of the campaign. The account of Michael the Syrian does not name any cities or fortresses in Byzantium being taken as result of the incursion, so that it appears likely that the invading armies ravaged just the countryside. Treadgold's suggestion that they penetrated as far as the Boukellarioi thema is not warranted by the sources and only based on a dubious identification of a river mentioned by some Arab poets as the place where the encounter with Našr took place (see Chapter 10.1).

Finally, although the Byzantines were heavily defeated in 838 and Theophilos faced an usurpation in Constantinople and the rebellion of the Persians, they did reasonably well in 839 to face the invasion of the Abbasid governor of the military

⁶⁰ Mich. Syr. 538–44, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 104–11.

⁶¹ Mich. Syr. 536–7, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 96.

⁶² Treadgold (1988) 321–2 and note 433 pleads for a dating in 840 as he considers that in 839 the Persians in Sinope were still rebelling against the emperor (see also Chapter 12). His dating cannot be ruled out, but there is no reason to exclude the possibility that the rebellion of the Persians ended late in 838 or even early in 839, before the summer campaign began in which the Khurramite leader Našr took part. On the other hand, Treadgold excludes the idea that Našr was present in the campaign and died at the hands of the enemy (as is expressly stated by Michael the Syrian), for he identifies him with Theophobos, who was executed in Constantinople at the end of Theophilos' reign. However, as we know that Našr was not Theophobos, but probably his father or in any case a military commander of the Khurramites (see Chapter 11.2), the possibility remains open that he resumed military functions at the frontier after the rebellion finished and Theophobos returned to the capital, where he remained for the rest of Theophilos' reign playing a symbolic role as leader of the Persians.

lands of the frontier, for Naṣr even defeated the contingent of Bashīr before being killed with his men. No other consequences of the campaign are mentioned. Obviously, the Byzantines were on the defensive for the moment, but the Arabs did not venture another massive campaign against them.

In another chapter of his work, Michael the Syrian lists further military actions between Byzantines and Abbasids after Amorion.⁶³ First of all a naval action of the “Romans” against the port of Antioch, Seleukeia, is mentioned. Michael says that the Byzantines “sacked the merchants, took prisoners and sailed away in their ships”. The caliph ordered a fortress to be built in the middle of the port to avoid future attacks.⁶⁴ Again, no further consequences of the naval expedition are to be noted. However, the landing on the Syrian coast of soldiers of the fleet of the thema of the Kibyrrhaiotai sent a clear message to the Arab rulers: the Byzantines did not content themselves with waiting for the annual expedition but were disposed to strike back if the occasion arose.

We do not know when this attack took place, for Michael mentions it after the execution of ‘Abbās in 838, saying that the events at Antioch happened “at this time”. As the previous campaign of Abū Sa‘īd could have happened in 839, this perhaps provides a terminus post quem. However, we must not discount the possibility that this event was misplaced in the chronicle of Michael the Syrian, as happened in certain cases.⁶⁵ A further look into the following narrative is needed in order to obtain certainty on the dating.

The next item preserved by Michael the Syrian in his account appears in the right chronological sequence. It refers in some detail to the abuses of Minkajūr, the governor of Azerbaijan, against the Armenians of his territory. Afshīn, the victor over Bābak in 837 and over Theophilos in Anzes in 838, is said by Michael to have been his uncle and to have even counselled him how to act. One Armenian merchant, whose goods Minkajūr coveted, is killed and his head sent to the caliph as if it were that of Bābak’s son-in-law, who apparently tried again to incite Azerbaijan to revolt against Abbasid rule. Then Minkajūr attempts to steal goods from an Arab resident in Armenia, who however succeeds in informing the caliph about the governor’s mismanagement. Mu‘taṣim orders Minkajūr to be put in prison, where he denounces his uncle Afshīn for inciting him to rebellion against Baghdad. The caliph is said to have killed Minkajūr and deposed Afshīn from his post as governor of Jibāl. These events are well known to Arab historians and are to be dated in 839.⁶⁶ This would mean that the previously mentioned naval expedition against Antioch also took place in 839. The reason for not linking it with the expedition of Abū Sa‘īd, which also happened in 839, as we saw above,

⁶³ Mich. Syr. 539–40, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 101–2.

⁶⁴ This attack has not been preserved in Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography* 152, trans. Budge (1932) vol. 2, 139, who follows closely the narrative of Michael the Syrian for this period.

⁶⁵ See Chapters 13.1, 15.5 and 16.1 for misplaced second versions of given events.

⁶⁶ See for example the account of Ṭabarī III.1301–2, trans. Bosworth (1991) 175–8.

is perhaps to be connected with the fact that the Seleucid year used by Michael always begins on the first of October. If the expedition of Abū Saʿīd took place in spring/summer 839 (1150 of the Seleucid era), the retaliatory naval attack on Antioch could be dated to autumn 839 (1151 of the Seleucid era). Towards the end of 839 Minkajūr was taken to Sāmarrā to be executed. If we want to date the naval attack against Antioch in spring/summer of 840, after the execution of Minkajūr, then we must suppose that Michael did not respect the relative sequence of events within each year.

The following item preserved by Michael is dated to the year 1152 of the Seleucid era, from October 840 to September 841:

In the year 1152, Abū Saʿīd entered the land of the Romans and took prisoners there. The Romans went out in his pursuit in Cilicia. They worsted him and brought back the prisoners.

Another short piece follows immediately:

Abū Saʿīd entered again the land of the Romans and came back in great disarray. The Romans arrived and took Hadath [Adata], Marʿash [Germanikeia] and the land of Melitene.

It would appear that this double defeat took place in 841, for the next notices mention the conspiracy of Afshīn against Muʿtaṣim, his imprisonment and his death, events that are to be dated to the years 840 and 841.⁶⁷ However, it could also be that the first expedition recorded in the year 1152 took place later in the year 840, for example in October. Therefore we cannot discount the possibility that the two raids of Abū Saʿīd were put together to unify the narrative, and not because they took place one after another during the same season of campaigns. In fact, the imprisonment and death of Afshīn, whom Michael refers to in a single account, took place during the years 840–841. Finally, as there was an exchange of letters between Muʿtaṣim and Theophilos after the campaigns of Abū Saʿīd (see below), it would be convenient to date the first campaign to the year 840, for otherwise we would not have time enough in 841 for two military campaigns and the ensuing diplomatic dealings between Constantinople and Sāmarrā: by the end of January 842 both the caliph and the emperor were already dead.

In any case, the Byzantines appear victorious against two successive expeditions led by the governor of Mesopotamia and Syria. Even more, in the first encounter they cross the frontier and enter Cilicia. Apparently they did not take prisoners on this occasion, as was the case in 831 (see Chapter 14.2), but

⁶⁷ Ṭabarī III.1303–13, trans. Bosworth (1991) 180–93 for a lengthy account of the conspiracy and imprisonment of Afshīn, recorded under HA 225 (12 November 839 to 30 October 840). Afshīn's death is however mentioned by Ṭabarī III.1314–19, trans. Bosworth (1991) 195–201 under HA 226 (31 October 840 to 20 October 841).

just freed the Roman captives and brought them back. In the second encounter, however, the Byzantines went further to the east and took the important cities of Adata and Germanikeia, plundering the land of Melitene. They thus came to the same location as the victorious campaign of 837 and went even further to the south of Sozopetra (see Chapter 16). The massive campaign of Mu‘tašim in 838 had therefore not prevented the Byzantines from attacking the same region as in 837. Moreover, contrary to what happened in 837, the Byzantine attack of 841 did not provoke any further retaliation from the Muslims, for the next note recorded by Michael the Syrian refers to the dealings leading to an exchange of prisoners between Theophilos and Mu‘tašim.

Michael the Syrian refers to Theophilos sending gifts to Mu‘tašim and asking for an exchange of prisoners. This time, Mu‘tašim, who had refused the payment offered by Theophilos after Amorion, accepted the gifts and gave him back even more presents. However, he declared that he could not accept an exchange on the same level for Byzantine and Arab prisoners, for the latter were for a Muslim more valuable than the Christians. He proposed therefore to Theophilos: “if you send me the Ṭaiyayē [Arabs] without demanding anything in exchange, we are able to bestow upon you double their number and outdo you in everything”. No answer from Theophilos to this offer is copied. The chronicle just adds that Mu‘tašim sent 50 camels loaded with presents and concludes by saying: “Peace was restored between the two kings.”⁶⁸

It has usually been considered that Theophilos rejected this offer from the caliph.⁶⁹ Treadgold for example argued: “though the emperor understandably declined to act on the caliph’s suggestion that he free his prisoners without guarantees, this exchange of presents was taken by both rulers as a sign that a truce existed between the two powers”.⁷⁰ In fact, the captives taken in Amorion in 838 were not delivered to the Byzantines on this occasion, for they were executed on 6 March 845, some months before a massive exchange of prisoners took place in September of the same year at the river Lamos in Cilicia.⁷¹ But it is unlikely that the prisoner exchange did not take place because of a refusal of Theophilos. It seems that Mu‘tašim was willing to come to an understanding with Theophilos concerning the exchange of prisoners, but he did not want to appear to be bowing before the demands of the emperor, who had made his offer after twice defeating the expeditions made by Abū Sa‘īd into Byzantine territory and even plundering Adata, Germanikeia and the land of Melitene. It would have been humiliating for Mu‘tašim to accept Theophilos’ offer in such a circumstance, for it would have represented a recognition of the failure of the objectives conceived for the Amorion campaign. If the caliph had actually been disposed to reject it, as in 838, then he would not have presented an alternative. Certainly it was too risky for

⁶⁸ Mich. Syr. 540, trans. Chabot (1899–1910), vol. 3, 102.

⁶⁹ See Müller (2009) Regest 441 with bibliography.

⁷⁰ Treadgold (1988) 324.

⁷¹ Müller (2009) Regest 448.

Theophilos to free the Arab prisoners in advance, for the caliph might not fulfil his part of the agreement. But it is also doubtful that peace could have prevailed between the two powers with just an exchange of gifts.

I think therefore that peace was restored, as Michael expressly says, because there were high expectations of a prisoner exchange. Negotiations probably continued to attain this goal. A formula was needed which could satisfy both rulers, and possibly Theophilos would have complied with the caliph's intention in some way, for he surely appreciated what really underlay the diplomatic answer from Mu'tašim. However, the emperor was probably dead (20 January 842) when the answer came from the caliph. Mu'tašim, too, had died some days earlier (5 January 842). Things would have to be dealt with anew by the new rulers. It was probably the refusal of Theodora to meet the demands of the new caliph Wāthiq that led him to execute the 42 martyrs of Amorion in 845, thus forcing the aforementioned exchange of prisoners later in the same year. But these events take place after the reign of Theophilos.

The military balance of the reign of Theophilos was not as negative, as is sometimes suggested, since the emperor succeeded in redressing the situation caused by the sack of Amorion in just a couple of years. If we consider the last campaigns along with the diplomatic activity we have analysed in section 18.2 of this chapter, we can present a moderately positive assessment of Theophilos' reign. One consequence of it was that never again would a caliph personally take to the battlefield against Byzantium.

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SECTION V

The Khazar Flank

The khaganate of the Khazars was of the utmost strategic importance for the Byzantines for several reasons. First of all, it controlled the routes to the southern Caucasus, thus playing a central role in the geopolitics of the area. We considered in Chapter 2.3 the possible support the khaganate lent to the rebellion of Thomas the Slav, whose soldiers came to a great extent from areas directly under Khazar control. Again, the campaigns of the Arabs against Byzantium in the 830s that we considered in Chapters 13–17 could not have taken place without having previously secured the neutrality of the Khazars.

Secondly, the Byzantine possessions in Crimea, which were in a certain sense the empire's door to the steppes, were bordered by the Khazars, who represented a major piece in the puzzle of nations who competed for dominion of the region. In particular, the historical emergence of the Magyars and Varangians/Rus during the first decades of the ninth century represented a new challenge to Byzantine diplomacy that could not be dealt with without considering Khazar interests. Thus references to the peoples living to the west of the Khazar khaganate and their relations with them and the Byzantines will be addressed in Chapter 20.

Finally, the Khazar Empire lay at a crossing of trading routes linking the Russian steppes with Central Asia and was therefore disputed territory with both Christians and Muslims competing for its control. This circumstance explains the multicultural component of the khaganate.

The main concern of the initial part of this section, Chapter 19, will be to set the famous Byzantine embassy to the Khazars led by Petronas Kamateros in Theophilos' reign in its historical context, for this will allow us to understand better Theophilos' policy in this area and the founding of a new thema in Crimea. We will suggest an early dating for this embassy against the prevailing *communis opinio*. We hope this will make more understandable the consequences of the later embassy of the Rus to Constantinople that happened in the reign of Theophilos (Chapter 20.1) and the ensuing conversion of the Khazars to Judaism (Chapter 20.2).

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Chapter 19

The Embassy to the Khazars and the Building of Sarkel

19.1 The Dating of the Embassy of Petronas Kamateros (I)

Both the Continuator and the *De administrando imperio* (henceforth *DAI*) of Constantine VII have preserved a very important account of a mission undertaken by an envoy of the emperor Theophilos to the land of the Khazars. The text in the version of the *DAI* runs as follows:

Ἀπὸ δὲ κάτωθεν τῶν μερῶν Δανούβεως ποταμοῦ τῆς Δίστρας ἀντίπερα ἡ Πατζινακία παρέρχεται, καὶ κατακρατεῖ ἡ κατοικία αὐτῶν μέχρι τοῦ Σάρκελ, τοῦ τῶν Χαζάρων κάστρου, ἐν ᾧ ταξεῶται καθέζονται τριακόσιοι, κατὰ χρόνον ἐναλλασσόμενοι. Ἐρμηνεύεται δὲ παρὰ αὐτοῖς τὸ Σάρκελ ‘ἄσπρον ὄσπιτιον’, ὅπερ ἐκτίσθη παρὰ σπαθαροκανδιδάτου Πετρωνᾶ, τοῦ ἐπονομαζομένου Καματηροῦ, τὸν βασιλέα Θεόφιλον πρὸς τὸ κτισθῆναι αὐτοῖς τὸ κάστρον τοῦτο τῶν Χαζάρων αἰτησαμένων. Ὁ γὰρ χαγάνος ἐκεῖνος καὶ ὁ πᾶς Χαζαρίας εἰς τὸν αὐτὸν βασιλέα Θεόφιλον πρέσβεις ἐναποστείλαντες, κτισθῆναι αὐτοῖς τὸ κάστρον τὸ Σάρκελ ἠτήσαντο, οἷς ὁ βασιλεὺς, τῇ τούτων αἰτήσει πεισθεῖς, τὸν προρρηθέντα σπαθαροκανδιδάτον Πετρωνᾶ μετὰ χελανδίων βασιλικῶν πλωϊμῶν ἀπέστειλεν καὶ χελάνδια τοῦ κατεπάνω Παφλαγονίας. Καὶ δὴ ὁ αὐτὸς Πετρωνᾶς τὴν Χερσῶνα καταλαβὼν τὰ μὲν χελάνδια ἔλιπεν ἐν Χερσῶνι, τὸν δὲ λαὸν εἰσαγαγὼν εἰς καματερά καράβια, ἀπῆλθεν ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ Τανάιδος ποταμοῦ, ἐν ᾧ καὶ τὸ κάστρον ἔμελλεν κτίσαι. Καὶ ἐπειδὴ ὁ τόπος λίθους οὐκ εἶχεν πρὸς κτίσιν τοῦ κάστρου ἐπιτηδεῖους, καμινία τινα ποιησάμενος καὶ βήσσαλον ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐγκαύσας, μετ’ αὐτῶν τὴν τοῦ κάστρου κτίσιν ἐποιήσατο, ἐκ μικρῶν τινῶν τῶν ἐκ τοῦ ποταμοῦ κοχλιδίων ἄσβεστον ἐργασάμενος. Οὗτος οὖν ὁ προρρηθεὶς σπαθαροκανδιδάτος Πετρωνᾶς μετὰ τὸ κτίσαι τὸ κάστρον τὸ Σάρκελ πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα Θεόφιλον εἰσελθὼν, εἶπεν αὐτῷ, ὅτι· “Εἰ θέλῃς ὄλως τὸ τῆς Χερσῶνος κάστρον καὶ τοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ τόπους κυρίως ἐξουσιάσαι καὶ τούτους μὴ τῆς σῆς ἐκτὸς γενέσθαι χειρός, προβάλλου στρατηγὸν ἴδιον, καὶ μὴ τοῖς ἐκεῖνων καταπιστεύσης πρωτεύουσί τε καὶ ἄρχουσι.” Μέχρι γὰρ Θεοφίλου τοῦ βασιλέως οὐκ ἦν στρατηγὸς ἀπὸ τῶν ἐντεῦθεν ἀποστελλόμενος, ἀλλ’ ἦν ὁ τὰ πάντα διοικῶν ὁ λεγόμενος πρωτεύων μετὰ καὶ τῶν ἐπονομαζομένων πατέρων τῆς πόλεως. Τοῦ οὖν βασιλέως Θεοφίλου πρὸς ταῦτα βουλευσαμένου τὸν ὁ δεῖνα ἐξαποστεῖλαι στρατηγὸν ἢ τὸν ὁ δεῖνα, ὕστερον ἀποσταλῆναι

προέκρινεν τὸν προρρηθέντα σπαθαροκανδιᾶτον Πετρωνᾶν ὡς ἐν πείρᾳ¹ τοῦ τόπου γεγνοντά καὶ τῶν πραγμάτων οὐκ ἀνεπιστήμονα, ὃν καὶ πρωτοσπαθάριον τιμήσας, προεβάλετο στρατηγόν, καὶ εἰς Χερσῶνα ἐξαπέστειλεν, ὀρίσας τὸν τότε πρωτεύοντα καὶ πάντας ὑπέκρινε αὐτῷ, ἐξ οὗ καὶ μέχρι τὴν σήμερον ἐπεκράτησεν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐντεῦθεν εἰς Χερσῶνα προβάλλεσθαι στρατηγούς. Ἀλλ' αὕτη μὲν ἢ τοῦ Σάρκελ τοῦ κάστρου κτίσις καθέστηκεν.²

In Jenkins' translation:

From the lower reaches of the Danube river, opposite to Distra, Patzinakia stretches along, and its inhabitants control the territory as far as Sarkel, the city of the Khazars, in which garrisons of 300 men are posted and annually relieved. Sarkel among them means “white house” and it was built by the spatharokandidatos Petronas, surnamed Kamateros, when the Khazars requested the emperor Theophilos that this city should be built for them. For the then chagan and the pech of Khazaria sent envoys to this same emperor Theophilos and begged that the city of Sarkel might be built for them, and the emperor acceded to their request and sent to them the aforesaid spatharokandidatos Petronas with ships of war of the imperial navy, and sent also ships of war of the captain-general of Paphlagonia. This same Petronas arrived at Cherson and left the ships of war at Cherson, and, having embarked his men on ships of burden, went off to that place on the Tanaïs river where he was to build the city. And since the place had no stones suitable for the building of the city, he made some ovens and baked bricks in them and with these he carried out the building of the city, making mortar out of tiny shells from the river. Now this aforesaid spatharokandidatos Petronas, after building the city of Sarkel, went to the emperor Theophilos and said to him: “If you wish complete mastery and dominion over the city of Cherson and of the places in Cherson, and not that they should slip out of your hand, appoint your own military governor and do not trust to their primates and nobles.” For up till the time of Theophilos the emperor, there was no military governor sent from here, but all administration was in the hands of the so-called primate, with those who were called the fathers of the city. The emperor Theophilos took counsel in this matter, whether to send as military governor so-and-so or such-an-one, and at last made up his mind that the aforesaid spatharokandidatos Petronas should be sent, as one who had acquired local experience and was not unskilled in affairs, and so he promoted him to be protospatharios and appointed him military governor and sent him out to Cherson, with orders that the then primate and everyone else were to obey him; and from that time until this day it has been the rule for military governors in Cherson to be appointed from here. So much, then, for the building of the city of Sarkel.³

¹ Editors † ἔμπειρα †

² *De administrando imperio* 42 (182.18–184.55).

³ Moravcsik and Jenkins (1967) 183–5.

The account of the Continuator is very similar. However, it also preserves some interesting additional details and is worth quoting in full:

Τῷ δ' ἐπιόντι ἔτει πρὸς τὸν κατ' ἀλλήλων πόλεμον οἱ τ' Ἀγαρηνοὶ καὶ ὁ Θεόφιλος ἐξεληθόντες ἔμειναν ἄπρακτοι παντελῶς ἀλλήλους καταπτοούμενοι, καὶ πρὸς τὴν αὐτῶν ἐπανάστρεφον. Κατὰ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν καιρὸν ὁ τε χαγάνος Χαζαρίας καὶ ὁ Πέχ πρὸς τὸν αὐτοκράτορα Θεόφιλον ἐπεμπον πρεσβευτάς, τὸ κάστρον ὅπερ οὕτω Σάρκελ κατονομάζεται αὐτοῖς κτισθῆναι ἐξαιτούμενοι, ὅπερ ἐρμηνεύεται μὲν λευκὸν οἶκημα, ἔστι δὲ κατὰ τὸν Τάναϊν ποταμὸν, ὃς τοὺς τε Πατζινακίτας ἐντεῦθεν καὶ αὐτοὺς διείργει τοὺς Χαζάρους ἐκεῖθεν, ἔνθα καὶ Χαζάρων ταξεῶται καθέζονται τριακόσιοι κατὰ χρόνον ἐναλλασσόμενοι. Ὡν τῇ αἰτήσει καὶ παρακλήσει πεισθεὶς ὁ Θεόφιλος τὸν σπαθα|ροκανδιδάτον Πετρωνᾶν τοῦ ἐπονομαζομένου Καματεροῦ, μετὰ χελανδίων βασιλοκοπλοῦμων καὶ τοῦ κατεπάνω τῆς Παφλαγονίας ἀπέστειλεν, εἰς πέρας τὴν τούτων αἰτήσιν κελεύσας ὑπαγαγεῖν. Ὅς ἅμα τῷ τὴν Χερσῶνα καταλαβεῖν τὰς μὲν μακρὰς ἡῆας ἐκεῖσέ που προσωμίσας ἐπὶ τῆς χέρσου κατέλιπεν, τὸν δὲ λαὸν ἐν στρογγύλαις εἰσαγαγὼν ναυσὶ μέχρι τοῦ Τανάϊδος διεβίβασθη, ἔνθα καὶ τὴν πόλιν ἔδει τοῦτοις οἰκοδομεῖν. Ἐπειδὴ λίθων ὁ τόπος ἠπόρει, ἐκ μὲν τῶν μικρῶν καχλῆκων τοῦ ποταμοῦ ἄσβεστον, ἐκ δὲ τῆς ὑποκειμένης γῆς πηλὸν ἐγκαύσας διὰ καμίνων, καὶ βίσαλον ἐργασάμενος, τὴν ὀρισθεῖσαν αὐτῷ δουλείαν μόγις μὲν, ἐπεραίου δὲ διὰ πολυχειρίας λαμπρῶς, καὶ πρὸς τὴν βασιλεύουσαν ἐπανάστρεφεν. Ἐδίδου δὲ καὶ περὶ τῆς Χερσῶνος τῷ βασιλεῖ γνώμην τε καὶ βουλήν, οἷς εἰς πείραν τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἦλθεν καὶ τῶν τόπων ὁμοῦ, ὡς «Ὅκ ἄλλως ἄρξεις τῆς χώρας αὐτῶν καὶ τῶν τόπων ὀλοσχερῶς ἢ στρατηγὸν προχειρίζομενος ἴδιον, ἀλλ' οὐ τοῖς ἐκείνων ἄρχουσὶ τε καὶ πρωτεύουσι καταπιστεύων σαυτόν». Οὐδὲ γάρ οὐδ' ἡμέτερός πω τῆς ἐκείνων προνοοῦμενος ἐξαπεστέλλετο στρατηγός, ἀλλ' ὁ λεγόμενος πρωτεύων μετὰ καὶ τῶν πατέρων τῆς πόλεως τὰ πάντα ἦν διοικῶν. Ἐπὶ τούτῳ ὁ βασιλεὺς Θεόφιλος οὐκ ἄλλον ἀλλὰ τὸν εἰρημένον Πετρωνᾶν, ὡς ἐν πείρᾳ κρίνας τοῦ τόπου, πρωτοσπαθάριον τε ἐτίμησε καὶ στρατηγὸν ἐξαπέστειλε, τὸν τότε πρωτεύοντα καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους θεσπίσας ὑπέκειν ἀνευδοιάστως αὐτῷ· ἐξ ὅτου περ καὶ μέχρις ἡμῶν ἐκράτησεν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐντεῦθεν εἰς Χερσῶνα προβάλλεσθαι στρατηγούς. Οὕτω μὲν οὖν ἦ τε τοῦ Σάρκελ οἰκοδομὴ ἐγένετο καὶ ἡ πρὸς τοὺς Χερσωνίτας τῶν ἐντεῦθεν ἀποστολῆ στρατηγῶν.⁴

In our translation:

In the following year both the Hagarenes and Theophilus went out to war against one another but, frightened of one another, they remained completely inactive and returned to their own countries. At this same time the Khagan and the pech of Khazaria sent emissaries to the emperor Theophilus requesting that the fortress called Sarkel, which means “white dwelling” should be built up for them; this latter is on the river Tanais, which separates the Pechenegs on one

⁴ Th. Cont. III.28 (122.16–124.5).

side and the Khazars themselves on the other, where three hundred men of the Khazars are garrisoned with periodic replacement. Theophilos ceded to their request and entreaty and dispatched the spatharokandidatos Petronas, son of the man called Kamateros, with chelandia of the imperial fleet and the katepan of Paphlagonia, commanding that they should carry out the Khazar's request. Once arrived at Cherson, Petronas brought up the long ships and left them on land; and embarking his forces in round boats he crossed over to the Tanais where he was to build the city for them. Because the place was lacking in stone, he baked in furnaces lime from pebbles of the river and mud from the underlying layers of earth, thus producing brick, and accomplished the task assigned him, albeit with difficulty, but in conspicuous fashion with a multitude of labourers; and he returned to the imperial city. Concerning Cherson he gave the emperor advice and counsel, in so far as he had experience of both men and places, that "You shall not rule over their land and territories entirely unless you appoint your own general, without trusting yourself to their rulers or chiefs." For no general of ours had ever been sent out to look out for their affairs, but the so-called chief was in charge of everything together with the fathers of the city. Thereupon, the emperor Theophilos dispatched as general none other than the aforementioned Petronas, judging him to have experience of the place; and bestowing on him the dignity of protospatharios, he ordained that the chief and the others should yield to him unequivocally; from which time to the present day the custom prevails that generals are promoted from here for Cherson. Thus came about the construction of Sarkel and the dispatching of generals from here for the Chersonites.

As we see, no exact dating for the event is provided by either text, except, of course, for the mention of Theophilos as the reigning emperor. This is especially true for the passage in *DAI*, where the history about the building of Sarkel and the sending of strategoi to Cherson is mentioned in a chapter that deals with the geographical description of the lands bordering the Black Sea from the Danube on the west to Abasgia in the east. It is on occasion of the mention of the geographical borders of the Patzinakia, on whose eastern border the Khazar fortress Sarkel lay, that the story was inserted as a kind of digression. As the editors already noted, the story about the mission of Theophilos' envoy Petronas in Sarkel and Cherson has a different source than the rest of the chapter.⁵ We can even surmise that a contemporary witness of events, perhaps the envoy proper, was the ultimate source of the information collected here. But we do not know whether the compiler of *DAI* had access to this source directly or only through a summary.

Constantine Zuckerman tried to prove that the embassy of the Khazars arrived in Constantinople in 839.⁶ Since the event is said by the Continuator to have taken place "in the following year" (τῷ δ' ἐπιόντι ἔτει) and it comes after a long excerpt about John the Grammarian where his consecration as patriarch on 21 April, a Sunday, is

⁵ Gyula Moravcsik in Dvornik et al. (1962) 153–4.

⁶ Zuckerman (1997a) 210–12.

mentioned, he concluded that the embassy should have arrived in Constantinople in the year following the appointment of John. As it is now generally admitted that John was appointed patriarch in 838,⁷ Zuckerman accordingly considered that the embassy must be dated to 839. The campaign of Theophilos linked to the embassy should also be of the same year. Zuckerman thought in fact: “The situation described in Theophanes Continuatus fits perfectly in 839, the year after both Byzantium (in 837) and the Arabs (in 838) have scored a major victory.”

Things are however not so simple as that, and, *pace* Zuckerman, it is certainly not “deconstructionism for its own sake” to reject his chronological sequence.⁸

To begin with, the Continuator does not mention the year in which John the Grammarian was consecrated. This is certainly not proof that he did not know it, for he usually does not give the year of the events but just the sequence. However, the omission of the year is not proof either that the Continuator knew it. In fact, the appointment of the Grammarian is mentioned after the exile of Manuel among the Arabs and his return to Constantinople through the agency of John the Grammarian, who went to Baghdad as ambassador in order to contact Manuel and offer him immunity from the emperor. We know that these events took place in 830 (see Chapter 5.3–5). Obviously, the consecration of John took place after this date, but its mention after Manuel’s return from exile is due, not to a chronological arrangement, but to the previous mention of John as ambassador. It is likely that since the Continuator did not know the exact year of John’s consecration, he considered it advisable to mention it at this point, after John’s embassy to Baghdad. It is also not to be discounted that the Continuator considered that John was appointed patriarch earlier in the reign of Theophilos.⁹

In any case, I think I have proved elsewhere that the Continuator tried to make a chronological narrative out of the dispersed and mostly undated pieces of information he got from his sources, so that we cannot trust his chronological sequences a priori, unless further evidence is provided.¹⁰ The present case does not appear to be an exception. In fact, the embassy of Theophilos dated by Zuckerman to the year 839 is followed by the campaign against Sozopetra of 837 (see Chapter 16)¹¹ and the campaign of Amorion of 838 (see Chapter 17).¹²

There are even further reasons not to date to 839 the campaign of Theophilos connected with the building of Sarkel. Despite Zuckerman, the emperor did not personally lead any army after 838. The sources, mainly Michael the Syrian,

⁷ Treadgold (1979b) 178–9.

⁸ So Zuckerman (1997a) 212, note 9 when rejecting my arguments as put forward in Signes Codoñer (1995) 543 and 546–7. I will recapitulate here some of my conclusions from then, but will add new ones.

⁹ For more arguments for an earlier patriarchate of John c. 832 see Chapter 21.3 (note 58) and Chapter 24.1 (note 28).

¹⁰ Signes Codoñer (1995) 668–9.

¹¹ Th. Cont. III.29 (124.6–125.15).

¹² Th. Cont. III.30–36 (125.16–134.21).

when recording military encounters in eastern Anatolia after 838, do not mention the presence of the emperor, as was the case with his previous campaigns (see Chapter 18.3). This excludes a dating in 839 for any campaign Theophilos could have commanded against the Arabs. A more likely dating would put it in 832, for the results of this campaign seem to have been indecisive (see Chapter 14.3–5). However, some fighting did take place on that occasion, despite the indication of the Continuator that both armies “remained completely inactive”. We may certainly discard this indication as an inaccurate and summary rendering of the campaign of 832, but more evidence would be required to make such a conclusion valid.

However, the problem is that a close chronological connection between this undated campaign and the embassy of Petronas is not warranted. Indeed, the account of the Continuator about the mission to Sarkel seems to have been taken from a source different from the narrative of the irresolute campaign of Theophilos against the Arabs. If we pay attention to the phrase connecting the report about Petronas’ mission to the previous campaign, we note first the vague dating “at this same time” and then the reference to the embassy of the Khazars to the imperial court. For the Continuator, as a historian, it was the embassy that was to be connected with the previous campaign, as his focus was on (sequential) facts, not on a geographical (timeless) description, as in the case of the *DAI*. However, it seems that the account of the source used both by him and the *DAI* was more of an ethnographic than of an historical nature. In fact, it appears that the source was first conceived as a report about the Sarkel fortress, which was therefore the main subject of the narrative.

This explains the curious way in which the Continuator describes the aims of the Khazar ambassadors coming to Constantinople, for he writes that they requested “that the fortress called Sarkel, which means ‘white dwelling’, should be built up for them”. In reality, the ambassadors did not request the building of “the fortress called Sarkel”, but just of a fortress, whatever the name that would be later bestowed upon it. Moreover, the exact place where the fortress should be built had perhaps not even been chosen when the ambassadors arrived in Constantinople. If the Continuator anticipates in his narrative the name of the to-be-built fortress (even along with its etymology!), it is surely because this information headed the excerpt he used as a source and he did not want to neglect it. This means that the Continuator’s source had Sarkel as focus and that the historical account was collected to provide a background to the place name. This kind of report tallies well with the aims and scope of works like *De thematibus* or *DAI*, where we find numbers of historical digressions and etymologies for explaining place names. Accordingly the connection between the embassy of the Khazars and the previous campaign of Theophilos against the Muslims could have been an inference of the Continuator and must be approached with some care.

Finally, we must consider the relationship between the passages of the Continuator and *DAI*. We certainly cannot discount the idea that the Continuator based his text directly on the chapter from *DAI*.¹³ However, some scholars have argued for a lost

¹³ Ševčenko (1992) 190, note 56.

common source for both.¹⁴ In fact, since the excerpt on Sarkel was surely written on behalf of Theophilos and was probably preserved in the imperial chancellery, it is likely that the Continuator had access to it before all the materials for the *DAI* were compiled in their final form in the last years of the reign of Constantine VII. Moreover, if we follow the convincing analysis made by James Howard-Johnston, it appears that Chapter 42 of the *DAI* with the account of the building of Sarkel belonged to a group of chapters (called by him “the northern dossier”) put together around 900 and just copied at a later stage by Constantine VII without substantial changes.¹⁵ There is therefore a strong probability that the Continuator borrowed the account not from *DAI* but from a common source.

In conclusion, neither *DAI* nor the Continuator provides us with a date for the embassy of Petronas to the Khazars. This may appear as a negative result, but allows us to reconsider the whole matter anew. The possibility that the embassy took place at the beginning of the reign of Theophilos must again be taken into account, especially because the campaign of 832 is the one which resembles more closely the campaign the Continuator linked with Petronas’ embassy, whatever his reasons were for doing so.¹⁶

If the Khazars were backing the revolt of Thomas the Slav during the civil war under Michael II, as we suggested in Chapter 2.3, it would have been in the interest of the Byzantines to seal an alliance with them, not only for the benefit of their possessions in Cherson, but also because this would facilitate military expeditions into the western Caucasus. In fact, the campaigns of the Byzantines in western Armenia, especially the one led by Theophilos in 835 in Sper and Theodosiopolis and the “Abasgian” campaign of 836 (see Chapter 15.2), would have been conducted much more easily had there been a previous understanding with the Khazars. Although the Khazars had regular commercial contact with the Abbasid caliphate and imitated their dirhams when striking their own coins,¹⁷ they continued to preserve their independence and their religion. It is significant that the Persian general Afhsīn thought of fleeing to the Khazars when he noticed that Mu’tasim suspected his fidelity.¹⁸

19.2 Against Whom was Sarkel Built?

Although neither *DAI* nor the Continuator says a word about the motives behind the Khazars’ request to the Byzantines to construct a fortress, it has long since been recognized that the position of the fortress at the western bank of the river Don was conceived to defend the river and obstruct its crossing to peoples coming

¹⁴ Bury (1906) 569–70 and Moravcsik (1936) 519.

¹⁵ Howard-Johnston (2000) 324–6.

¹⁶ For the connections of Petronas to Theodora’s family see Chapters 4.2 and 7.1.

¹⁷ Kovalev (2005) and Brook (2006) 79–81.

¹⁸ Ṭabarī III.1305–6, trans. Bosworth (1991) 182–3.

from the west.¹⁹ But who were the peoples whose advance to the east the Khazars tried to prevent?

The Rus and the Magyars (Hungarians) have traditionally been considered the most likely candidates and recent research has reached a consensus on the Magyars.²⁰ The reasons are diverse, but one of the most conclusive is the fact that the Rus followed fluvial routes coming from the north and proceeding to the south, so that a fortress like Sarkel was of no use against them, whereas it seemed appropriate against the advance of the nomad Magyars coming from the west.²¹ Also important is the explicit testimony of Ibn Rusta, an Arab geographer of the very beginning of the tenth century, who writes: “It is said that the Khazars in the past had build fortifications around themselves for protecting themselves against the Magyars (*al-majgh[a]rītu*) and other peoples adjacent to their land.”²² It appears then that Sarkel was constructed to curb Magyar expansion to the east.

If this is true, then the Khazars lost control of the steppes west of the Don in the same measure as the Magyars took possession of them. The Magyars, who seem to be closely related to the Khazars,²³ appear at the beginning of the ninth century occupying territories between the Dniester and the Don. Although literary sources before this century do not mention the Magyars as such,²⁴ it is probable that they had already settled in this area at the end of the seventh century, filling the void left by the Bulgars in their march to the west and the Balkans.²⁵ They acted for a time as allies of the Khazars and formed an integral part of their khaganate. However, about 800 people from three rebellious tribes of the Khazars, called Kabars, left the Khazars and joined the Magyars.²⁶ From this point on, the resulting confederation, under the name of the Magyars, acted as an independent state from Khazaria.²⁷

The building of Sarkel against the Magyars may also make sense if we consider that the Khazars confronted an even worse threat coming from the east, such as the opening of a commercial route directly linking the lands of northern Russia and Islam. This new route avoided Khazar lands and passed through the Khwarizm and the Volga Bulgars. This was the main factor behind the decline of Khazar power in

¹⁹ Zuckerman (1997b) 55.

²⁰ See for example Shepard (1995) 24, Kristó (1996) 16, 17, 127–9 and 132, Zuckerman (1997b), Kovalev (2005) 235, Petrukhin (2007) 246–8 and Róna-Tas (2007) 272–5. However, Howard-Johnston (2007) 174–5 still argues that the Khazars developed a new system of forward bases designed to extend Khazar authority beyond the core territories of the khaganate, therefore stopping Rus expansion.

²¹ Zuckerman (1997b) 55.

²² Ibn Rusta 143.1–3.

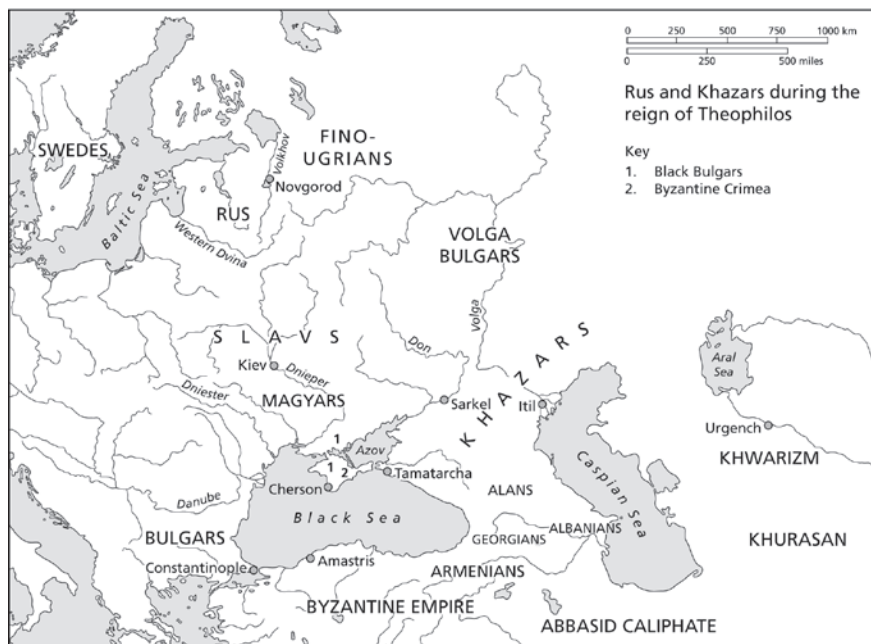
²³ Róna-Tas (2007) 270–72.

²⁴ Kristó (1996) 7–17.

²⁵ Róna-Tas (2007) 273–4 considers that the Magyars (or would it be better to speak of “Proto-Magyars”?) migrated at this time from the Kuban region to the territory between the Dnieper and the Lower Danube. See *DAI* 38 for the original land of the Magyars.

²⁶ *DAI* 39.

²⁷ Róna-Tas (2007) 274.



Map 9 Rus, Magyars and Khazars during the reign of Theophilos

the tenth century, as Noonan has recently demonstrated, as well as a decisive cause for the conversion of the Bulgars to Islam.²⁸ But the struggle had been ongoing since the eighth century. Interestingly enough, we even have reports of an Abbasid attack on the Khazar kingdom coming from Urganch during the reign of Ma'mūn, that is to say, before 833.²⁹ Under these circumstances, the new collaboration with the Byzantines in the west may also have provided an alternative to Khazar trade in view of the increasing threat of the Abbasids in the east.

19.3 The Thema of the Klimata and the Province of Gotthia

The Khazars, who continued to control Crimea, found it difficult to defend without the help of the Byzantines, who held the city of Cherson. In fact, it was only through the Kerch strait that the Khazars could keep in contact with their Crimean lands, for the Magyars had barred access to the isthmus that linked the Crimean peninsula to the Pontic steppe. Constantine Zuckerman rightly argued that this might have been the reason that the Khazars were in contact with the Byzantines.

²⁸ Noonan (2000) and (2007) 234–40. See also Vaissière (2000) for the presence of merchants of Central Asia in Khazaria.

²⁹ Nazmi (1998) 70–73.

The empire helped them to construct a fortress against the Magyars at the Don and got in exchange the possibility of reinforcing its military presence in the Crimea, thus also checking Magyar infiltration in this area. The fight in the Crimea in the 860s between the Magyars and the Khazars, as attested by the Slavic *Life of Constantine*,³⁰ is the final confirmation that Crimea became one of the most disputed areas between the two powers of the steppe.³¹

The project of converting Cherson into a thema with its own strategos, suggested by Petronas Kamateros upon his return to Constantinople, surely needed the consent of the Khazars. It appears that it was put in force, for a new thema of the Klimata is already attested in the *Taktikon Uspenskij*, dated 842–843, immediately after the death of Theophilos. There, a patrikios and strategos of the Klimata (πατρικίος καὶ στρατηγὸς τῶν Κλιμάτων) is named in last place after the other strategoi of the themata.³²

The new thema may have comprised Cherson and neighbouring areas, perhaps even the city of Bosphoros, controlling the straits of Kerch. The Arab geographer Ibn Rusta wrote at the beginning of the tenth century: “The Magyars ... make raids against the Slavs and bring them prisoners along the coast until they arrive with them to a port of the lands of the Rum, which is called Karkh.”³³ If the identification of Karkh with Kerch/Bosphoros is correct, this would be evidence that by the end of the ninth century the Byzantines had extended control to this important city, key to the straits, where the archaeologists have detected the presence of Khazars during the period.³⁴ It is however difficult to know when the empire took hold of this port (already in Theophilos’ time?) and whether it did so permanently.

The Gotthia that appears in a list of ecclesiastical provinces dated by its editor Jean Darrouzès to the ninth century could perhaps be related to the creation of the thema of the Klimata.³⁵ In this list an eparchia of the Gotthia (ἐπαρχία Γοτθίας) referring to the Crimea is mentioned twice, first with the number 38 (37 for the editor) in its right place and then with the number 37 (47 for the editor) at the very end of the list.³⁶ The bishopric sees included in the eparchy in number 37 are eight: the metropolitan see of Doros (identified with Mangoup near Cherson)³⁷ and seven further bishoprics not mentioned elsewhere. Number 47 includes only the first two of these bishoprics, Chotzirōn and Astēl (ὁ Χοτζίρων and ὁ Ἀστὴλ), which are situated in Khazaria: the first probably refers to the Khazars proper and the second is undoubtedly their capital Itil. Among the other five bishoprics mentioned in number 37, two of them have ethnic names, perhaps referring to the Magyars: the

³⁰ *Life of Constantine* 8, trans. Dvornik (1969) 359–60.

³¹ Zuckerman (1997b) 67–73.

³² Oikonomides (1972) 49.

³³ Ibn Rusta 142.18–143.1.

³⁴ Zuckerman (1997b) 68.

³⁵ Shepard (1998) 19–20.

³⁶ Darrouzès (1981) 20–33 (study) and 230–45 (edition), esp. 241–2 and 245.

³⁷ Alekséenکو (1996) 272–3.

bishops “of the Onogouroi” (ὁ Ὀνογοῦρων) and “of the Ounoi” (ὁ Οὔνων). The other three are Choualēs (ὁ Χουάλης, that is Khwalis on the Lower Volga, where the Khwarizmian elements of the Khazar state were settled),³⁸ Rhetch (ὁ Ῥετέγ, not identified) and Tamatarcha (ὁ Ταμάταρχα, at the peninsula of Taman facing Kerch).³⁹

It is difficult to draw any conclusion from the names included in this list, for we are not sure about its exact date and intention and do not even know whether the ecclesiastical province of Gotthia was ever actually established.⁴⁰ Marie-France Auzépy suggested that the eparchy of Gotthia with its Khazar bishoprics could have been conceived by the Isaurian emperors at a time when Khazaria and the empire had excellent relations as a result of the marriage of Constantine V with a Khazar princess. An evangelization of Khazaria was perhaps the ultimate goal of this province.⁴¹ The existence of two lists in the information edited by Darrouzès may perhaps reflect some kind of continuity for this project. The presence of the “Hungarians” in the list may also point to a ninth-century dating, unless we suppose that the Magyars were still acting as representatives of the Khazar power to the west of the Don and close to Cherson, in which case an eighth-century dating seems more likely. Thus we do not know whether Theophilos may have given new impulse to the project because of his restored alliance with the Khazars, although this possibility must be taken into consideration. In fact, it makes sense that the creation of a new *thema* was not only implemented with a reinforcement of the military presence in Crimea, but also followed by measures aiming at the evangelization of the nomadic nations of the area. Unfortunately, no evidence has been preserved that could be adduced in support of this hypothesis.⁴²

³⁸ The inhabitants of this area have been identified with the Jewish *chalisioi* (Χαλίσιοι) mentioned by Joannes Kinnamos, ed. Meineke (1836) 107 and 247 among the peoples fighting in the Hungarian army. See also Pritsak (1978) 262.

³⁹ The city is also mentioned in *DAI* 42.11, 92, 95, 97 and 53.493 and has been identified with the Tmutarakan of the Old Russian sources, placed in the Taman peninsula facing Kerch. See Moravcsik (1958) vol. 2, 297 and Shepard (2009) 431–41.

⁴⁰ Shepard (2009) 424–5 stresses that “there never ceased to be some sort of ecclesiastical organization on the Black Sea’s north coast” from the sixth century.

⁴¹ Auzépy (2000) 206–7.

⁴² For the Life of John of Gotthia, who died before the reign of Theophilos, see Huxley (1978), Auzépy (2000) and Howard-Johnston (2007) 169–70.

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Chapter 20

Rus, Slavs and Bulgars in the Steppes

Although the Magyars may have been the dominant power of the steppes between the Don and the Dniester during the reign of Theophilos, there were other peoples or nations in the area who played some role in the confrontation of the major powers. First of all there were the Rus, the Scandinavian warriors who came from the Baltic and established in what is today northern Russia. They had made an alliance with the local Slavs and other tribes in the north and were forcing their way through fluvial routes into the international markets of the south, bordering the Black Sea. As we shall see, recent archaeological research seems to establish that they followed a route through the Volga and the Don and were accordingly on good terms with the Khazars, for Arabic silver travelled via these rivers to their territory. But the emergence of the Magyars probably put an end to this understanding between the two powers.

20.1 The Embassy of the Rus and the Dating of the Embassy of Petronas Kamateros (II)

The Latin *Annales Bertiniani* inform us that on 18 May 839, Louis the Pious received at Ingelheim a Byzantine embassy which was accompanied by some emissaries of the king of the Rus, who according to the text was called “chaganus” by his people. These Rus are said to have arrived earlier in Constantinople for reasons of friendship, but being unable to return home had accompanied the Byzantines on their embassy to the Frankish emperor. The Byzantines showed Louis a letter from Theophilos in which he requested Louis to grant the Rus assistance to travel home through his realm, “because barbarous and most savage peoples of exceedingly great ferocity had taken the roads through which they had arrived to him at Constantinople” (*quoniam itinera, per quae ad illum Constantinopolim venerant, inter barbaras et nimiae feritatis gentes inmanissimas habuerant*). Theophilos “did not want to make them return by the same way, in order to avoid any risk that they might run” (*quibus eos, ne forte periculum inciderent, redire noluit*).¹ Unfortunately for them, the German emperor discovered that the so-called Rus were in fact Swedes and, considering them spies, retained them at his court.

Zuckerman suggested that the Rus would have arrived in Constantinople c. 837 and departed from there to the west in the company of the Byzantines before the

¹ *Annales Bertiniani* 19–20 (anno 839), trans. Nelson (1991) 42–3. For this embassy see also Chapter 18.2.

capture of Amorion by the Arabs in August 838 (see Chapter 17.3), for the *Annales Bertiniani* report that Theophilos informed the Frankish emperor “of the victories he had been awarded by God in his fight against foreign nations” (*de victoriis quas adversus exterarum bellando gentes caelitus fuerat assecutus*).² For Zuckerman, this message must have referred to Theophilos’ victorious campaign of 837 against Sozopetra and could hardly have been sent after August 838. Accordingly, if the Rus could not return home it was because some disruption in the routes leading to their lands had taken place. Zuckerman further supposes that the Rus had already arrived in Constantinople in 835 and links the problems preventing their return with the Byzantine campaign of 836 in the area to the north of the mouth of the Danube. In fact, according to the chronicle of the Logothete,³ the descendants of the Macedonians captured by Krum in 813 and deported “beyond the Danube” (πέραν τοῦ ποταμοῦ Δανουβίου), rose in arms against their masters and tried to return home during the reign of Theophilos. The emperor sent a fleet to take them back to Constantinople. However, the Bulgarians did not allow them to cross the Danube and march through Bulgaria to Byzantium and even called the Hungarians for help when the exiles apparently tried to march to an unnamed point in the north where the imperial fleet was waiting for them. They finally succeeded in going aboard the ships but only after defeating the Hungarians, who barred them access to the landing place of the Byzantine ships.

The dating of the episode is controversial. Moravcsik argued for 837⁴ and Treadgold for 836,⁵ as they considered that the events coincided with the renewal of the second decade of the peace treaty signed between Byzantium and Bulgaria, which they dated alternatively to 817 and 816. However, there is no evidence at all of a renewal of the treaty in these years, whereas both Byzantine literary sources and Protobulgarian inscriptions refer to many military clashes between Byzantines and Bulgarians in Thrace during the period, affecting even major cities like Thessalonike and Philippopolis.⁶ The chronology of all these events is disputed; even the name and regnal dates of the Bulgarian khans is anything but assured. Finally, it does not help the argument that the future emperor Basil, one

² Shepard (1995) 41 thought that the victories referred to were won by Louis, so that the Byzantines just congratulated the Frankish emperor on them. Zuckerman (1997b) 54, note 10 rejects this interpretation, probably rightly, although the wording of the passage is somewhat confusing. It must not completely be ruled out that Theophilos may have presented the withdrawal of Mu‘tašim’s army after the capture of Amorion as a victory against the Muslims, who did not reach their final objectives after all. If the embassy had already departed from Constantinople in spring 838, it appears strange that a whole year passed before Louis received it in May 839 at Ingelheim.

³ Log. (A) *Michael kai Theodora* [131] 10–13 (236.78–237.111).

⁴ Moravcsik (1961) 74–5.

⁵ Treadgold (1985).

⁶ Beševliev (1980) 289–8.

of the Macedonians rescued from their captivity among the Bulgarians, is said by the Logothete to be 25 years old at the time.⁷

Be this as it may, the point for us is that during the reign of Theophilos the Bulgarians appear as allies of the Magyars, who are named successively “Hungarians” (Οὔγγροι), “Huns” (Οὔννοι) and “Turks” (Τούρκοι) by the Logothete. Considering the difficulties the Byzantine fleet had in reaching a landing point to the north of the Danube, it seems unlikely that the Rus could have reached Constantinople sailing along the western coast of the Black Sea.

Zuckerman argued that the Rus arrived in Constantinople in 835 or 836 through the Khazar territory using either the Don or the Dnieper route and that they could not return this way due to the occupation by the Magyars of the area between these two rivers.⁸ There are however, some problems with this hypothesis.

First, if we assume Zuckerman’s suggestion to be right, then the Rus must have been on good terms with the Khazars at the time of their embassy to Constantinople, for otherwise they would not have been allowed to pass freely through Khazar territory. However, if the Rus had then been allies of the Khazars, they would not have met any problems returning to their lands through Cherson and the Don route, although the Hungarians had in the meantime invaded the land west of the Don and blocked the Dnieper route.⁹ But this was certainly not a real option for the Rus, who even preferred to negotiate with the German emperor a way back to their lands in Scandinavia, despite knowing that he was not exactly fond of the Swedes living on the northern fringes of his empire. It thus appears that the Rus may have broken by then or at least loosened their alliance with the Khazars. But is there any evidence for this supposition?

According to the *Annales Bertiniani* the king of Rus present at Ingelheim claimed the title of “khagan”, in what appears to be a clear challenge to the Khazar dominance of the steppes. The “khagan” title was indeed considered equal to that of emperor in early medieval diplomatic practice and its use by some princes of the Rus in the area around lake Ilmen and later Novgorod could mean that he had already advanced claims on it *before* his ambassadors departed from their

⁷ For details see Treadgold (1988) 290–92 and especially note 397 for the identification of the Dniester as the river where the Byzantine landing took place, against Zuckerman who thinks that it was rather the Danube, the only river mentioned in the sources.

⁸ Zuckerman (1997b) 54–55. He dates the rebellion of the Kazhars and their alliance to the Magyars to 870 (*ibid.* 63), whereas Róna-Tas (2007) 274–5 argues for 800. This great chronological difference is explained by the lack of any assured literary mention of the Hungarians before the reign of Theophilos and the difficulties provided by the confused account of *De administrando imperio* 38–9, where no absolute dating is given.

⁹ The Arab geographer Ibn Khurrādādhbih, writing in the second half of the ninth century, refers (p. 154) to the Rus following the Tanais river (Don) and crossing the Khazar lands on their way to Byzantium. According to Konovalova (2000) 397–400, 406–7 his testimony reflects the situation prior to the embassy of the Rus to Theophilos.

lands to Constantinople.¹⁰ It was perhaps the rule over the Slavic tribes in the steppes which was then at stake. The control that the Khazars had exerted so far in the Middle and Lower Dnieper region over the Slavonic agricultural colonists providing them with corn had suddenly disappeared with the independence of the Magyars, who occupied this area.¹¹ A new status quo was needed and the Rus could have sent their embassy to Constantinople to explore an understanding with the empire. The title of “khagan” adopted by their king conveyed a clear message to the Byzantine court: the Rus were from then on ready to handle matters for themselves, without direct backing of the Khazars.¹² It is thus understandable that they followed a new route to Constantinople, for their former allies, the Khazars, would not have allowed them to use the Don, much less the Volga.

It thus appears likely that the embassy of the Rus’ “khagan” on its way to Constantinople first followed the route of the Dnieper. This does not mean that they had settled in this area by then, since no Scandinavian complexes dating to the ninth century have been discovered in the Upper or in the Middle Dnieper region.

¹⁰ Golden (1982) discusses at length the meaning and legitimacy of the khagan title and concludes at p. 87 that the Rus could not have borrowed or adopted it “without having met the commonly recognized criteria that gave legitimacy to the bearer of this title”, which he sees in the personal family ties with the ruling Khazar lords. Otherwise, this would have been considered usurpation. More recently, Petrukhin (2007) 255–7 argues that the title cannot be used as evidence for the existence of a “Russian khaganate”. However, its historicity is proved beyond any doubt by Zuckerman (2000) 97–100, who rejects former theories as speculative. See Franklin and Shepard (1996) 27–50 for the location of the khaganate in Riurikovo Gorodishche (“Riurik’s fortress”) at the northern border of the Ilmen Lake, close to later Novgorod. New arguments for this thesis in Zuckerman (2000) 106–14.

¹¹ Petrukhin (2007) 248.

¹² The *Life of George of Amastris* §43, composed by Ignatios Diakonon before 843, mentions a raid of the Rus in Amastris that took place after the saint’s death c. 806. According to its editor Vasil’evskij the raid is to be dated in the period of the second iconoclasm, since Ignatios wrote the text before 843. The majority of scholars rejected Ignatios’ authorship for almost a century, until Ševčenko (1977) 122–4 definitely confirmed Vasil’evskij’s hypothesis with new arguments. Treadgold (1988–1989) argued for a dating of the Rus’ raid to 818–819, preceding the creation of the themata of Paphlagonia and Chaldia by Leo V. More recently Zuckerman (2000) 100–102 (see there for further bibliography) suggested that the Rus’ raid could be precisely dated to the beginning of the 830s. Unfortunately the *Life* says only that the Rus began their plundering in the “Propontis” and then marched against Amastris, apparently devastating the stretch of the coast lying in between. The text says nothing about the route they followed from the north or whether they were still allies of the Khazars at this time. Doubts have even been raised about the identification of the “Propontis” mentioned in the *Life*, for it could refer to the sea of Azov and the Crimea: see Vernadsky (1949) 8–9 and Treadgold (1988–1989) 136–7. Under these circumstances any dating remains tentative. However, it would not be risky to think that the first emergence of the Rus in the sources as plunderers of the Byzantine seashore shortly preceded their first official embassy to the capital, or even served as preparation for it: a display of military force usually serves to encourage diplomatic dealings.

It was only after the settlement of Oleg in Kiev in 882 that the Rus appeared here and colluded with the Magyars.¹³ For the Rus the Dnieper was for the moment just a new route to reach Cherson,¹⁴ from where they could easily cross to the southern coast of the Black Sea. In fact, the ports of the Crimea enjoy direct access to northern Asia Minor, especially to the facing harbour of Sinope, and the crossing can take just one day between the spring and early autumn.¹⁵ Moreover, if Constantinople was the goal of the ambassadors, it is logical to assume that they relied on the Chersonites for the crossing. However, the new route would not easily have been practicable in all places. If the Rus had travelled along the Dnieper to its mouth, they would have surely faced the Magyars. Moreover, from the Dnieper's mouth, the easiest route to Constantinople ran along the east Thracian coast and the Danube delta, territories disputed between Magyars and Bulgarians and where even the imperial fleet, as we saw, met problems. It thus appears likely that the Rus followed an alternative route to Cherson, perhaps leaving the Dnieper at the so-called ford of Kichkas, the point where the river turns abruptly westward, and then taking a land route to the Byzantine cities of the Crimea. This inland route is indeed mentioned in the *De administrando imperio* as the one usually followed by the Chersonites on their way to Russia.¹⁶

Whatever route the Rus followed on their embassy to Constantinople, there remain some chronological problems to be dealt with, firstly whether the above-mentioned Khazar embassy is to be considered a consequence of the one sent in 837–838 by the Rus' "khagan". The chronology suggested by Zuckerman (and generally accepted until now) would inevitably lead to this conclusion, for he dated the Khazars' mission to the year 839. Nevertheless, as we have seen above in Chapter 19.1, no evidence can be gained from the sources in support of this dating. Moreover, as Shepard has rightly argued, the contacts with the Rus continued well after the embassy of 837–838, as is evidenced by the presence of Byzantine coins of Theophilos at different points in the Scandinavian lands. Most important, in Hedeby (near Kiel) a lead seal of "Theodosios patrikios, basilikos protospatharios and chartoularios of the vestiaron" has been found, which undoubtedly belonged to Theodosios Baboutzikos, the Byzantine ambassador to Venice and the Frankish empire during the years 840–842 (for his embassy see Chapter 18.2).¹⁷ Whatever the circumstances were by which the seal arrived in Hedeby, it clearly reveals that diplomatic contacts between Byzantium and the Rus were pursued at a high level after the embassy of 837–838. Now, we must reconcile this fact with the

¹³ Petrukhin (2007) 246–54.

¹⁴ The "northern arc" according to McCormick (2001) 562–4.

¹⁵ Zuckerman (1995) 213 and Shepard (2009) 422–3. See Noonan (2006) 49: "The surface currents of the Black Sea flow north–south from the Crimea to Sinope, assisting sailors on this crossing while the currents off cape Karambis to the west flow south–north. It is significant that Sinope founded its own colony of Kytoros just west of Karambis."

¹⁶ *DAI* 9.65–67.

¹⁷ Shepard (2005) 46–58.

supposition that the Khazars became allies of the Byzantines exactly at the same time, as Zuckerman suggested.

It has been said that if the Rus had been challenging Khazar authority in the steppes, as the use of the title of “khagan” by the Rus’ king clearly proves, they would not have been welcomed by the Byzantines, who had sealed a close alliance with the Khazars at the time.¹⁸ Obviously, the Byzantines could have dealt simultaneously with both powers, but they risked offending the Khazars, still the major power in the area, by dealing with the more distant Rus on equal terms.

It thus appears possible that the embassy of Petronas and the negotiations for the building of Sarkel date from the beginning of the reign of Theophilos, as we suggested above. Sarkel would have been conceived as a barrier against Magyar expansion. However, things may have rapidly deteriorated and the Magyars gained the upper hand in many regions to the west of the Don, threatening even Crimea. It is significant that when Petronas Kamateros came back from Khazaria, he counselled the emperor to send a general to Cherson and adjacent regions, in order to avoid that “they should slip out of his hand” (τούτους μὴ τῆς σῆς ἐκτὸς γενέσθαι χειρός).¹⁹ Not only Khazaria to the east of the Don, but also the Byzantine possessions around the Crimea were threatened by Magyar expansion. And the Khazars were apparently not able to furnish the Byzantines with the military help they needed to defend it. The weakness of the Khazars could have been noticed at Constantinople after the mission of Petronas and motivated the exploring of new alliances, like the one with the Rus, who may have begun at the time their marauding in the Dnieper area.

The Byzantines may have created a military thema in Cherson and an ecclesiastical province with the support or assistance of the Khazars, as we argued above, but they were at the same time willing to contact new emerging powers in the region just in case the crisis of the khaganate progressed and their former ally could not be of any use regarding their interests in the area. The Byzantines, who had witnessed the rise and fall of so many empires of the steppes, could not watch passively the diminishing influence of the Khazars to the west of the Don without putting in force an alternative plan. This has been the usual procedure of imperial diplomacy since the time of the Romans, as the numerous examples compiled in the *De administrando imperio* easily demonstrates.

The Rus, who travelled to Constantinople via Byzantine Cherson, would have observed with interest the reinforcement of the military presence of the Byzantines in the Crimea as a result of the mission of Petronas Kamateros. Byzantium appeared to them as an unexpected new agent in the area who could help free them from the Khazar yoke and open new trade routes to the Black Sea. Alternatively, the Byzantines, who may have realized for the first time the seriousness of the Magyar threat as a result of the naval expedition sent to the mouth of the Danube c. 836–837 (if we accept this dating as valid), could have considered the Rus useful

¹⁸ Petrukhin (2007) 247 and note 1.

¹⁹ *De administrando imperio* 42.42.

allies against the Magyars, for they could attract to their side many local Slavonic tribes of the steppes, as was already the case in the lands to the north under their control. Finally, the use of the Rus as mercenaries in the Byzantine army was also a welcome possibility for Theophilos, who was making an appeal for the supply of troops after the defeat of Amorion. In fact, only a few years later, in the reign of his son Michael III, “Russian” soldiers were already entering the Byzantine service as imperial guards.²⁰

This last possibility has some consequences for the date of the arrival of the Rus to Constantinople. According to Zuckerman, they would have arrived there well before the defeat of Amorion in 838, for according to the *Annales Bertiniani* Theophilos informed the Frankish emperor of his previous triumphs and even demanded of Louis and his people to thank God for them, for He was the giver of all victories (“datori victoriarum omnium”). No mention therefore is made of the defeat of Amorion in 838, as would be expected if this had already taken place.

If Zuckerman’s inference is correct, this would not exclude the Rus departing from Constantinople to the west in summer 838, shortly before the taking of Amorion by Mu’taşım. But they could even have departed afterwards, when Theophilos was already preparing a diplomatic offensive in the west to counteract the effects of the crushing defeat at Amorion (see Chapter 18.2). That Theophilos did not mention the defeat to his Frankish colleague should not surprise us. The Byzantine emperor, who not just aimed at a renewal of the alliance with Louis but badly needed it, could not but stress the military potential of his armies, as is made evident through his previous victories. The defeat at Amorion, probably already known to the western emperor, therefore went unmentioned, and is also significantly silenced in the correspondence Theophilos entertained with ‘Abd al-Rahmān of Cordoba after 838. To excuse oneself for recent setbacks was surely not the most advisable tactic for an ambitious embassy (we could follow here the well-known maxim “excusatio non petita, accusatio manifesta”) and perhaps the lengthy account of the Byzantine civil war made by Michael II, Theophilos’ father, in his *Letter to Louis* acted as a deterring factor for the emperor, who now tried to make good previous errors in his dealing with the western emperors.

The embassy of the Rus to Constantinople in 838 could thus be regarded as the consequence of the new balance of power, which was slowly taking form in the steppes. However, this new alliance brought collateral damage, as it could not be expected that the Khazars would regard the approach of the Byzantines to the Rus without any reaction.

20.2 When did the Khazars Convert to Judaism?

The date of the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism is a highly controversial issue, which has triggered a significant amount of studies without creating a consensus

²⁰ Gen. IV.10 (63.65–67). See Blöndal and Benedikz (1978) 32–3.

among scholars.²¹ Byzantinists tend to place the conversion in the 860s according to the account of the *Life of Constantine*, where the future apostle of the Slavs debates in 861 with the supreme leader of the Slavs about the respective merits of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, thus apparently confirming that no definitive conversion to Judaism could yet have taken place at the time.²² Most of the Arab sources, dating from the tenth century, also seem to confirm the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism only from the end of the ninth century, but not before.²³ As a matter of fact, both Greek and Arabic sources of the ninth century remain in general silent about the circumstances of the Khazars' conversion to Judaism, as if this had never taken place.

However, other versions of the Khazars' conversion to Judaism have been preserved that date it much earlier. This is prominently the case of the so-called anonymous Khazar letter from the Genizah of Cairo and the reply of Khazar king Joseph to Ḥasday ibn Shaprūt (c. 915–970), the famous Jewish courtier of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Raḥmān III. Both texts, written in Hebrew, have been preserved as fragments from an eleventh-century codex that probably contained copies of Ibn Shaprūt's diplomatic correspondence.²⁴ As Ibn Shaprūt corresponded with the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII between 949 and 955,²⁵ it would be possible to date his correspondence with the Khazars to these years, for it was only with the acquiescence of Constantinople that he contacted the Khazar rulers. In any case, the Khazar letters refer to a conversion of the Khazars to Judaism at the very beginning of the seventh century, in the context of the persecutions against Jews begun during the reign of the emperor Herakleios (610–641). The letter of Joseph even dates the conversion to precisely 340 years before Joseph's time. This early dating is untenable and has been not accepted by scholars, but it undoubtedly reflects the official version of the conversion as presented by the Khazar ruling elite by the middle of the tenth century.²⁶ Then, the conversion must have been considered not very recent at the time. These letters also serve to document what could have been an early penetration of the Jews in the territories of the steppes.

In fact, the question of conversion could have been posed for the Khazars only after the Umayyad general Marwān broke through into the Khazar core lands on the Volga in 737 and forced the khagan to convert to Islam.²⁷ It appears that this forced

²¹ A detailed overview of the Arabic, Hebrew and Greek sources in Dunlop (1954) 89–170, 194–6.

²² See Zuckerman (1995) and Shepard (1998).

²³ See Pritsak (1978) and Golden (2007) 141–50 for a complete list of Arabic authors dealing with Khazar conversion, whereby the not always duly considered problem of their sources is briefly approached in each case.

²⁴ See Pritsak (1978) 272–6, Zuckerman (1995) and Golden (2007) 145–7 for details about these two letters and further bibliography.

²⁵ Signes Codoñer (2004a) 224–30 and 243.

²⁶ See Golb and Pritsak (1982) 130–32 for an alternative version.

²⁷ Golden (2007) 137–8.

conversion had no permanent consequences, although Islam continued to exert a presence among the Khazars after that date. But the invasion could have been important in another sense, for it perhaps obliged the Khazars to define themselves against the two major monotheistic religions of their neighbours. They may have chosen Judaism as a result, not only because this religion provided a neutral status between Byzantium and Islam, but also because it secured commercial relations with other lands with a Jewish presence. In fact, conversion to Judaism by non-Jewish peoples was not unprecedented at the time.²⁸

We must certainly rule out that the population of the Khazar khaganate converted to Judaism in its majority, at least at the start of the process of the conversion. The process may have indeed been slow and followed different stages, as suggested by Omeljan Pritsak some time ago.²⁹ In a multicultural and multiethnic empire as the Khazars' was, it would have been too risky to undertake a forcible conversion of all its inhabitants without putting in danger the fragile consensus on which the rule of the khagans ultimately depended. There is no material evidence connecting the rebellion of the Kabars and Magyars against the khaganate (see Chapter 19.2) with the conversion to Judaism but it appears as a consequence of the instability of the Khazars' power, based on a precarious equilibrium between different tribes.

The Khazars may have begun a process of rapprochement to Judaism as early as the second half of the eighth century, but it was probably not aimed at a mass conversion of all their subjects to the new religion. The Khazar rulers may have initially intended to give some kind of official status to Judaism inside their state in order to gain independence in respect of the neighbouring major powers. To put it in other words, the adherence to Judaism of the Khazar ruling elites was perhaps more a consequence of the need for an authoritative religion, which could represent their state abroad, than of a sincere conversion. In fact, most of the conversions in the steppe peoples grew out of political considerations as a result of geo-strategic constellations.³⁰ It would be a long time until the "internalization" of the new religion and its transformation into a sign of identity for the Khazar Empire, as described by Peter Golden, took place.³¹

The much-debated institution of a dual kingship in the Khazar Empire can be connected with this representative function of Judaism in the khaganate. According to Pritsak, between 799 and 833 the khagan lost his military-political function, which was transferred to the beg, but remained a sacral figure.³² He established 799 as *terminus post quem* because in 798–799 the khagan still appeared leading the armies of the Khazars in a campaign against Arab-held Darband on the Caspian sea. The year 833 was established as *terminus ante quem*, for Pritsak dated to that

²⁸ Golden (2007) 152–3.

²⁹ Pritsak (1978).

³⁰ Golden (2007) 123–30 for a short typology of the processes of conversion among nomadic peoples.

³¹ Golden (2007) 157–8.

³² Pritsak (1978) 278–80.

year the embassy of Petronas Kamateros to the Khazars, where the khagan and the beg appear as their common representatives, as we have seen. This date was later modified to 838 as a result of the new dating of the embassy. Although we know almost nothing about how roles were shared between the khagan and the beg, modern research has proceeded beyond the evidence to suggest that the conversion to Judaism was promoted by the beg whereas the khagan represented for a time the old traditional religion.³³ This sharing of roles may appear illogical from the point of view of modern nation-states, but for multicultural empires it was perhaps an intelligent way of integrating all the subjects under their sway. In fact, a similar sharing of roles was practiced even by the imperial couple in a well-developed state like Byzantium at different times, for example with Justinian defending the Chalcedonians and Theodora the monophysites under (never officially declared) mutual understanding.³⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that after the Khazars promoted Judaism, many other religions such as Christianity and Islam continued to be present and represented in the khaganate, as is revealed by many more or less contemporary sources, which make a clear difference between the religion of the ruling classes and that of the subjects.³⁵

We can therefore conclude that the promotion of Judaism in the Khazar state did not preclude the existence and even the promotion of other religions. It was convenient for the khaganate to have a flexible foreign policy and to remain open to every kind of alliance with its neighbouring powers according to the changing geo-strategic conditions. A steady progress of Judaism inside the Khazar state at the cost of other religions might initially have been less advantageous for its interests than equilibrium between the different peoples and religions of its subjects. We can expect a series of advances and setbacks in the role Judaism and the other religions played in the khaganate until the final “internalization” of Judaism as the “national” religion of the Khazars perhaps as late as in the second half of the ninth century, if not even later.

This may explain why Constantine/Cyril still had hopes of gaining the Khazars for Christianity as late as 861³⁶ or that an ecclesiastical province such as Gotthia had sees in different areas of the khaganate towards the middle of the ninth century, despite the fact that the official recognition of Judaism by the Khazars might date from the beginning of the ninth century. Even Masʿūdī, writing towards the middle of the tenth century, appears to understand the difference. In his description of the Khazar capital Itil he says:

³³ See Kovalev (2005) 230–34 with further bibliography. Golden (2007) 155–7 is more cautious concerning the date. He acknowledges the institution of dual kingship as a widespread phenomenon in Eurasia, but considers that Jewish reformers did not need to “create a sacral monarchy still laden with pagan elements”.

³⁴ For a recent assessment of Theodora’s role see Leppin (2011) 288–93.

³⁵ For the sources see again Golden (2007) 137–50.

³⁶ See *Life of Constantine*, chapters 8–12, pp. 358–71.

In this city there are Muslims, Christians, Jews and pagans. As concerns the Jews, they are the king, his entourage and the Khazars of his tribe. The king of the Khazars converted to Judaism during the caliphate of Rashīd [786–809]. Some Jews joined him, arriving there from various Islamic urban centres and from the Rūm. This was because the king of Rūm, in our time in 332 it is Armanūs [Romanos I Lekapenos, 920–944], converted those Jews who were in his kingdom to the Christian religion, using coercion on them.³⁷

There is no reason to doubt the exact dating provided by Mas'ūdī for the conversion of the king of the Khazars to Judaism³⁸ provided we take into consideration all the caveats made previously and accept that the conversion could not have occurred in only one stage. In fact, Mas'ūdī himself limits the influence of Judaism to some tribes of the Khazar state and mentions the significant presence of other religions in the khaganate.

Accordingly, it is likely that after the privileged relation the Khazars had with the Isaurian dynasty (Constantine V married the daughter of the khagan), the political turbulence that shook Byzantium during the iconophile period, especially after the fall of Eirene, made it advisable for the Khazars to approach Judaism. This was during the reign of Harūn al-Rashīd (786–809), as Mas'ūdī states. The reasons for that change may have to do with personal links between the khagan and the Isaurian dynasty (now lost from knowledge) or with the difficulty in accepting icon worship for the Jews and Muslims of the khaganate. But whatever the cause of this new course, it did not bar the way for a renewal of the links between Byzantium and the khaganate in the second iconoclast period, especially during the reign of Theophilos. The mission of Petronas Kamateros undoubtedly represents this new attempt to re-establish a close alliance between the two powers.

We refuted in Chapter 19.1 the idea that the text of the Continuator provides a dating for this embassy. It now also appears that an embassy after 838 makes no sense either. The major defeat at Amorion in this year could not be ignored by the Khazars, who were obviously not able to anticipate at that time the future Byzantine reaction. They may of course still have chosen Byzantium as an ally despite the temporary setback of the empire (and this would speak for the capacity of Theophilos as ruler to overcome his failures), but it was perhaps more advisable for them to wait and see. This could have been especially true at the time, for we can surmise that the victorious Mu'taṣim increased the pressure of the Abbasids on the Khazars in connection with his Anatolian campaign of 838. Considering the economic dependence of the Khazars on the caliphate,³⁹ it is reasonable to infer that they abstained from provoking the caliphate by a tighter alliance with

³⁷ Mas'ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold*, vol. 2, 8–9, trans. Vasiliev (1950) 31, Pritsak (1978) 276–7 and Golden (2007) 144.

³⁸ Against Zuckerman (1995) 246 and 250. See Golden (2007) 154. Brook (2006) 107–8 also dates the conversion according to Mas'ūdī.

³⁹ Noonan (2007) 229–44.

the defeated Byzantine emperor. Moreover, it must be taken into account that Mu‘tašim’s victory in 838 was made possible mostly by the new regiments of Turkish mercenaries serving under his command (see Chapter 17.5). We do not know whether there were Turkish Khazars among them, but even if this was not the case, the Khazars could not have remained ignorant of the presence of Turkish contingents at Sāmarrā.

Time was needed to construct a new fortress on the Don, and if we conjecture that the Khazar mission arrived in Constantinople in 839, there was practically no time to put into force the project before Theophilos died in January 841, about two years later. The embassy of the Rus to Constantinople, perhaps to be dated to 838, is also to be considered in this context, for if the Byzantines acknowledged the prince of Rus as khagan, this would certainly not have been welcomed by the Khazars. Finally, that the Khazars may not have been especially friendly towards the Byzantines in 838 is made evident by three special issues of dirhams struck by the Khazars in that year.⁴⁰ We will now consider briefly the significance of these particular coins.

The Khazars began to strike their own coins c. 825, following the pattern of the Islamic dirhams but, as Kovalev put it, “with numerous misspellings of Arabic words, mistakes in Kufic orthography, and erroneous mints, dates, rulers, and their combinations”.⁴¹ This took place approximately during the Byzantine civil war between Michael II and Thomas. In 838 the Khazars for the first time struck dirhams containing the name of the mint (*Arḍ al-Khazar*, “Land of the Khazars”) and, most importantly, the actual date of the emission, HA 223. To date, 84 coins of this class have been found. To the same mint belonged two other coin types without date but which must be contemporary for they are part of the same die chain. One of them, of which 77 examples have been found, contained the sign called *tamgha*, which was connected to the Turkic political heritage, although its precise significance has not been ascertained. Finally, five further coins of the same date have been discovered, at which in the spot reserved for a quote from the Quran, the legend was inscribed *Mūsā rasūl Allāh*, “Moses is the apostle of Allah/God”.⁴²

According to Roman Kovalev, who studied these coin types, the last one was struck to mark the official conversion of the khaganate to Judaism. If we accept his dating, 838, as a result of the closeness of the Moses-dirhams to the other two classes, then we would conclude that the Khazars converted to Judaism in this year.

It appears difficult to admit that the Byzantines began diplomatic contacts with the Khazars *after* their official conversion to Judaism and that this point, so decisive for the future relations of the two powers, was completely silenced in the account of the ambassador Petronas Kamateros. It appears that the most likely course of events is that Petronas travelled to Khazaria to construct Sarkel *before*

⁴⁰ HA 223 spans the Christian calendar from 3 December 837 to 22 November 838.

⁴¹ Kovalev (2005) 225.

⁴² For details about these three coin types see Kovalev (2005) 226–30.

838, probably at the very beginning of the reign of Theophilos, as we have already suggested.

The Moses-dirhams struck in 838 may have signalled an episodic crisis within Byzantium after the capture of Amorion. But it would certainly be excessive to consider the five pieces of this class of Khazar dirhams as marking a more or less sudden conversion to Judaism of the Khazar state. In fact, they were struck in apparently smaller quantities than the two other Khazar dirhams of the special issue of 838. And we cannot exclude that the *tamgha*-dirhams carried not only a political, but also a religious, message.⁴³ Moreover, the Moses-dirhams have no continuity in later coin types providing similar messages, for the Khazars continued to strike dirhams as they had in the past but without any marks of Khazar identity.⁴⁴ It appears that the Moses-dirhams were struck only in 838 as a response to a specific situation, which was somehow superseded some months later, for no more similar state-religious insignias were ever again displayed on Khazar coins. If these coins celebrated “the momentous political and religious transformation” which took place in 838, as Kovalev suggests, it is not easy to see why they did not continue to be struck even later. The fact that the coins never reached the caliphate or were not read by the inhabitants of the khaganate (their supposed audience), for they were carried to the land of the Rus, is not an explanation for their lack of continuity. It cannot be considered a failure that the Khazars successfully diffused their own currency among the northern nations with which they traded. Whether this currency carried specific legends or not was perhaps a matter of secondary importance for the ultimate objectives of the Khazar state.

Kovalev considers indeed that the special coins were aimed at those individuals capable of reading Arabic, for the inscriptions were written in that language. However, he also notices that all of the coins found hitherto were carried by Rus merchants to the north.⁴⁵ As it seems unlikely that the Khazars did not foresee the final destiny of these special issues, the most logical conclusion is that they were conceived just for the people who used them, collected them in hoards and buried them thereafter. These were the Rus, who had sent an embassy to Byzantium in about 837 and whose prince had appointed himself “khagan” in open defiance of the Khazar leader. It does not matter that neither the majority of the Rus nor the Slavs could read Arabic. It was enough that some of them could read the inscriptions or that they were told what the inscriptions said through the agency of other peoples with whom they traded. In medieval and ancient societies literacy was the possession of a few and writing had a function not only for readers but also

⁴³ Kovalev (2005) 240–42 does not consider the possible religious relevance of the *tamgha* symbols, but speaks in general terms of a new political-religious ideology conveyed by all the three emissions struck in 838. He connects the political change with the reinforcement of the power of the beg and the religious reform with the conversion to Judaism.

⁴⁴ Kovalev (2005) 242.

⁴⁵ Kovalev (2005) 239–40.

for viewers.⁴⁶ If the Khazars had intended their dirhams for literate traders, they would have avoided mistakes and misspellings in the dirhams they struck. But for them the image of the written Arabic was more important than the text itself.

In any case, the special issues of the Khazar dirhams of 838 surely did not go unnoticed by the Rus, who were, one presumes, told of the message they carried. It was a message of self-assertion of Khazar identity, a message the Rus probably also conveyed to Constantinople. We can only speculate about the reasons why this took place only in 838 and not before or after that date. But I think that this had to do not with a substantial change in religious stance inside the khaganate, but that it was rather related to the changing geo-strategic balance in the area. The alliance of the Rus with the Byzantine Empire or the defeat of Theophilos at Amorion would have been grounds enough for the Khazars to reconsider their alliance with Byzantium. Under such circumstances, the embassy of Petronas Kamateros probably preceded, rather than followed, this change.

20.3 The Alliance of Theophilos with Bulgars and Slavs

Another possible clue for an alliance between Theophilos and the nations around Cherson is a short passage of Mas'ūdī about the campaign of the emperor against Sozopetra in 837 where some nations allied to Theophilos are listed:

And in this year 223 Theophilos son of Michael, king of the Rum, marched with his army, and with him were the kings of Burjān (Bulgars), the Burghar (Bulgars), the Ṣaqāliba (Slavs) and others among those who are their neighbours from the kings of the nations, and he fell upon the city of Zibaṭra (Sozopetra) from the border of the Jazarī and took it by the sword, killing the youth and the old or taking them prisoners.⁴⁷

As far as I know, no explanation has been provided until now for the iteration of the presence of the Bulgars in this text. The two names used for designating Bulgars (Burjān and Burghar) in the Arab tradition appear to be confounded and used indistinctly for referring to Volga Bulgars or Danube Bulgars (Bulgarians),⁴⁸ but as both are used together, they should in principle refer to different nations.

In the *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, a Persian geographical treatise written in 982, the Christian Burjān living in the steppes of Thrace and the pagan Burgharī living on the hills are included, along with the Christianized Slavs (Ṣaqāliba), among the

⁴⁶ For a reflection on the acquisition of literacy among the Rus compared with the ancient Euboeans see Signes Codoñer (2011).

⁴⁷ Mas'ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold*, vol. 7, 133–4, trans. Vasiliev (1935) vol. 1, 330, who copies the French translation of Barbier de Meynard.

⁴⁸ An overview over the terminological problems in Nazmi (1998) 101–13.

nations somehow belonging to the empire of the Rum.⁴⁹ As we see, it is the same sequence we find in our passage. Minorsky, who translated the work, considered the variants used by different Arab writers for naming the Bulgars and concluded that the Burjān and Bulgharī named as part of the Byzantine Empire referred both to the Danube Bulgarians, with whom he also identified the “Inner Bulgarians” described in another chapter of the work.⁵⁰ The Volga Bulgars are in fact referred to only in a single further chapter,⁵¹ exactly after the one devoted to the Khazars.⁵² Minorsky thought that the existence of three different entries for the Danube Bulgarians in the *Hudūd al-‘Ālam* was easily explained by a conflation of different sources where the same people appeared but under different names.⁵³

However, without denying the dependence on the Arab sources by the Persian author of *Hudūd al-‘Ālam* and admitting the prevailing confusion about the different denominations for the Bulgars, Minorsky does not take into account the presence of another branch of the Bulgar people on the north coast of the Black Sea, the Black Bulgars, usually said to live in the area of the Crimea or the Sea of Azov.⁵⁴ Recent research seems to show that the origin of the Great Bulgaria of Khuvrat was not, as has been generally assumed, the region of the river Kuban to the north of Abasgia, where the Khazar state originated, but the area around the Dnieper, where some Bulgar tribes remained, not having followed the rest of the people in their migration to the Balkans or to the middle course of the Volga.⁵⁵ Omeljan Pritsak even thought that the work composed by caliph Ma’mūn to answer the questions of the ruler of the Burghar regarding Islam was addressed to the Pontic–Bosporan Bulgars.⁵⁶ This reveals again the importance of this nation at the time.

As we saw above in section 20.1, the khan of the Bulgars may have renewed a peace treaty with Byzantium in 836. This could have been important enough for Mas’ūdī to mention and to include the kings of the Burjān among the allies taking to the field with Theophilos in the campaign of 837. However, the expanded reference to the Burghar (for which no kings are mentioned), the Slavs and other neighbouring nations in Mas’ūdī’s passage (written some decades before the *Hudūd al-‘Ālam*) apparently goes beyond a simple reference to the khan of

⁴⁹ *Hudūd al-‘Ālam* §42, 16–18.

⁵⁰ *Hudūd al-‘Ālam* §45.

⁵¹ *Hudūd al-‘Ālam* §51.

⁵² *Hudūd al-‘Ālam* §50.

⁵³ Minorsky (1970) 423 and 438–40.

⁵⁴ See *De administrando imperio* 12 and 42.77 and the comments of Jenkins (1962) 62 and Belke and Soustal (1995) 88, note 85.

⁵⁵ Golden (1992) 239–40, 253 and Róna-Tas (2007) 273. See Theophanes 357–60 for the origin of the Bulgar state and its division into five tribes. Noonan (2007) 221 argues that the Bulgars had settled in the Crimea abandoning their former nomadic way of life since the eighth century and adds: “by the late eighth and early ninth century much of the Khazarian Crimea was thus populated by a relatively prosperous agrarian population of Bulghār background”.

⁵⁶ Pritsak (1979) 6–7.

Bulgaria and may have referred to further peoples, related or not with the Volga-Bulgars and settled in the areas around Cherson.⁵⁷ These were peoples with whom Byzantium was perhaps establishing new links as a consequence of the Magyar invasion, of which the empire took note around 836–837 after a military clash of the Byzantine refugees north of the Danube. The creation of the thema of the Klimata was probably connected with these events.

Certainly, in the text of Mas‘ūdī we would expect a direct reference to the Khazars,⁵⁸ as they played a major role in this new status quo. But it could be that by 837 Byzantium, as we suggested above, was already re-orientating its policy in the area towards the Rus and the Slavs. Certainly, Mas‘ūdī’s text lends only a very weak support for this hypothesis, but it must be taken into account along with the other testimonies we have been considering in the previous pages.

⁵⁷ Interestingly, Mas‘ūdī does not mention here the presence of the Persian Khurramites among the troops of the emperor.

⁵⁸ The sentence we have translated as “he [Theophilos] fell upon the city of Zibaṭra [Sozopetra] from the border of the Jazarī” is based on a conjecture of the editors, for the original Arabic had “Khazarī” instead of the proposed “Jazarī”, which makes better sense, for the city of Sozopetra borders the region of Jazīra. Only if we suppose a major corruption of the text and put the reference to the “border of the Khazarī” in connection with the aforementioned peoples would we have the expected mention of the Khazars. But this rendering of the passage seems unwarranted.

SECTION VI

The Melkites

We have scarcely any reliable source for the relations between the iconoclast emperor Theophilus and the Melkite Christians. The apparent exception is the appeal the three Melkite patriarchs supposedly wrote to the emperor Theophilus c. 836, the so-called *Letter to Theophilus*. As we shall see, this text is usually considered clear evidence of the iconophile stance of the Melkite Church in the first half of the ninth century, for it contains a dossier of sources in support of icon worship, and has accordingly been advanced as confirmation of the Melkite opposition to the iconoclastic policies in the areas of Syria and Palestine during the ninth century. Things are not, however, so clear-cut.

As I have tried to prove elsewhere, in the period after the Abbasid revolution there appears to be an increasing number of Melkites who turned their back on the cult of images, thus paving the way for some understanding with the imperial church in Constantinople during the reign of iconoclastic emperors.¹ The numerous references to the cross in the theological treatises of Melkites of the eighth and ninth centuries or even in their debates with contemporary Muslims, especially compared with the absence in most of them of any mention to icon worship,² represent a first caveat against the extended image of eastern Christians as fervid adherents of icon worship at the time.³ On the contrary, figures such as John of Damascus and Theodore Abū Qurra, undoubtedly the most prominent theologians of the Melkites and convinced defenders of images, do not necessarily represent the mainstream Melkites at the time, as has sometimes been assumed.⁴ Islamic pressure on images in general (the so-called “iconophobia”) – as perhaps attested in the partial destruction of figurative mosaics in the pavements of some Palestinian churches of the eighth century⁵ – contributed to this new trend among eastern Christians outside the empire, as is already apparent in the eighth century.

¹ Signes Codoñer (2013c).

² See especially Swanson (1994).

³ However, Griffith (1992c), (2007) pleads for the prevalence of icon worship at the time.

⁴ For the Damascene see Speck (1981) 209–24, Auzépy (1994), Griffith (2008a) and, more generally, Louth (2002); for Theodore Abū Qurra see Griffith (1985), (1992a), (1992b), (1993), (1997), Samir (2005) and Lamoreaux (2001), (2002), (2009).

⁵ Piccirillo (1996) and Ognibene (2002). Maguire (2009) links, however, this phenomenon with Byzantine iconoclasm.

It was only during the second patriarchate of Photios that the Melkite prelates expressly accepted the Nikaian council of 787 as the seventh ecumenical, most probably because many members of their communities did not support the open worship of icons as defined by Constantinople.⁶ But this does not mean in any way that we should automatically identify these men as iconoclasts, for the controversy over icons assumed a very different form in the lands of Islam.

It is against this background that we will proceed to an analysis of certain aspects of the *Letter to Theophilus*. Through internal evidence taken from the text we will try to prove in Chapter 21 that the icon dossier was not part of the original text and that, accordingly, it cannot be proved that the Melkite ecclesiastical authorities were convinced supporters of icon worship. An understanding between them and the emperor Theophilus was therefore conceivable at the time, either on a religious level (as a response to the summoning of a council in Constantinople: see Chapter 21) or on a political level (as a consequence of the military triumphs of the emperor: see Chapter 21). Although the stages by which the present text of the *Letter* was forged are not easy to disentangle and our conclusions are only by way of approximation, we will try to prove that there was indeed an original text addressed to the emperor that was interpolated and expanded by an iconophile writer. As to the where and who, we will make some suggestions in Chapter 21 that will obviously remain hypothetical.

Then, in Chapter 22 we will review the apocalyptic fears that appeared in Islam during the caliphate of Ma'mūn and their echoes in some Greek sources of the period. Some Christian circles seemed at the time surprisingly optimistic about the real possibility of a radical turnabout of the status quo in the Middle East and even considered the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. However unrealistic or deceptive these hopes may appear, they serve to give us a better understanding of the religious and cultural climate of the period and to settle the reign of Theophilus in its proper context.

⁶ Signes Codoñer (2013b), (2013c).

Chapter 21

The Letter of the Three Melkite Patriarchs to Theophilus

21.1 An Interpolated Text

The *Letter to Theophilus* is a much-debated text,¹ which enjoyed widespread diffusion in the Byzantine era and was much reworked and expanded at different times.² According to the title of the work in what appears to be the version closest to the original, the letter was addressed to the emperor Theophilus by the Melkite patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, respectively named Christopher, Job and Basil. The title also claims the letter to have been “written in the holy city of Jerusalem in the church of the Holy Resurrection” as a result of a synod held there, which 185 bishops, 17 abbots and 1153 monks attended (τὸν ἀριθμὸν ἐπισκόπων ρπε´, ἡγουμένων ιζ´, μοναχῶν ,αρνγ´). A dating is provided for the synod: “in the month of April, the 14th indiction, in the year 6344” (μηνὶ Ἀπριλλίῳ ἰνδικτιῶνος ἰδ´, ἔτους ,ζτμδ´), which corresponds to April 836. The title further informs us that the letter is “about the holy, venerable and revered icons” (περὶ τῶν ἁγίων καὶ τιμίῶν καὶ σεβασμίῶν εἰκόνων), adding that at the head of the text “the holy representation of the all-holy Theotokos Maria, depicted bearing the Saviour in her arms” was appended.³

The work begins by speaking of the Incarnation of Christ and the symbols of his humanity he left to mankind for his remembrance in the form of Baptism and the Eucharist.⁴ The emperor is then addressed as the authority established by God and his victories are hailed,⁵ but the authors of the text reclaim their condition of “rulers of souls” and beg Theophilus to pay attention to their dogmatic opinion.⁶ After a short reference to the destruction of pagan idols brought about by the Christians, a

¹ There are two recent editions of the text, both published within a short space of time and dealing at some length with the problems of the authenticity of the work: Gauer (1994), which includes a German translation, and Munitiz, Chrysostomides, Harvalia-Crook and Dendrinis (1997), with an English one. Unless otherwise stated, I will follow the text of the second, quoted as *Letter to Theophilus* and the corresponding paragraph.

² In the edition of Munitiz further later variants of the text, one of them attributed to John of Damascus, are published. I will refer to these variants only occasionally in the following discussion.

³ *Letter to Theophilus*, Title.

⁴ *Letter to Theophilus*, 1–2.

⁵ *Letter to Theophilus*, 3

⁶ *Letter to Theophilus*, 4.

doctrinal justification of the veneration of the icon of Christ begins, based mainly on historical arguments.⁷ A description of Christ's physical appearance follows, accompanied by 15 stories dealing with a dozen images.⁸ The next section starts with more theological argumentation and includes two more stories about visions of the devil in Hagia Sophia. The concluding part mentions again the image of the Virgin and Child and addresses the emperor as pious, doing so in a respectful and deferential manner.⁹

Paul Speck, Heinz Gauer and Julian Chrysostomides, who devoted detailed studies to this version of the *Letter* (excluding later variants and developments), agreed that the present text is an enlarged and interpolated version of a substantially shorter letter, now lost, which was actually sent by the patriarchs to Theophilos.¹⁰ But to ascertain which parts are original, and which are not, was not an easy matter and their opinions diverged to a great extent concerning individual passages. Speck scrutinized the text chapter after chapter and judged, mostly according to the content, which sections were probably written by the patriarchs and which were in his opinion later interpolations. His method was rather arbitrary for it depended on a subjective assessment of what was to be expected from iconophile patriarchs writing to a Byzantine emperor. And his final conclusions presupposed that the original letter passed through many stages in its transmission, whereby not only was the text heavily interpolated but also the papyrus support suffered significant damage, thus making some passages scarcely readable. Gauer, who based his analysis on Speck, followed however a more conservative approach, with the consequence that he admitted great parts of the text as being authentic.¹¹

The method adopted by Chrysostomides was different. She divided the text of the *Letter* into four main sections according to their content. She also considered in a more systematic way the protocol to be observed in an address to the emperor, the vocabulary and style employed, the aggregative or anthologic nature of the central section of the work (a list of miracles performed by icons), the sources, the historical references and the kind of quotations employed. She further connected each of the parts to different stages of the transmission, and concluded that the original core of the work was to be sought in the initial chapters (salutation–§6a), a passage in the middle of the work (§8a–§8f) and the ending (§14–§15). Chrysostomides finally suggested that this original core of the text “went through one stage, or even two stages, of interpolation, when elements were introduced that did not form part of the official teaching of the Church”.¹²

⁷ *Letter to Theophilos*, 5–6.

⁸ *Letter to Theophilos*, 7–13.

⁹ *Letter to Theophilos*, 14–15.

¹⁰ Speck (1990) 449–534, Gauer (1994) lxxii–lxxvi and Chrysostomides (1997).

¹¹ According to the numeration of the edition of Munitiz, Gauer admits as original the title, the salutation, and §§ 1a–3a, 3c, 4a–4g, 5c–5j, 6c–7d, 7.1a–7.8a, 8d–8f, 13a–13d and 15.

¹² Chrysostomides (1997) xxxvii.

After her study, an article by Dimitry Afinogenov appeared with some comments about an unedited Slavonic version of the letter, probably made on Mt. Athos in the second half of the fourteenth century but based on an old Greek version of the text. Taking into account certain details (a lesser number of miracles linked with icons, more direct appeals to the emperor Theophilus), Afinogenov supposed this version to be even older than the one preserved in the Greek tradition.¹³ He has now reinforced his arguments in a detailed study of the Slavonic text that introduces his edition and is accompanied by an English translation.¹⁴ There Afinogenov points out that the Greek manuscript prototype of the Slavonic translation can be dated no later than the third quarter of the ninth century. However, it must be stressed that all the manuscripts preserving the text are later than the fourteenth century, that Afinogenov still admits interpolations in the Slavonic text, and that there are some passages, as we shall immediately see, in which the Slavonic version seems to summarize the Greek text.

Accordingly, it is to the arguments of Chrysostomides that we will turn our attention, as her systematic approach appears to be the most convincing, although one could also argue that she oversimplified the problems posed by the textual transmission in order to present a clear-cut scheme that does not necessarily correspond to the complex reality. Nevertheless, her conclusions are based on an overall conception of the text that is lacking in the studies of Speck and Gauer. She does not claim either to explain any single problem posed by the text, but just to offer a likely explanation for its structure and the assembling of its major sections.

It is worth considering in this connection how the Byzantines may have worked with the texts when they tried to amplify or even to modify them according to a given purpose. Speck seems to presuppose that they reworked practically every sentence in order to fit them all into an overall picture and make a new coherent text with a new message out of an older one with a different intention. He also appears to think that they were always unsuccessful in their attempt to erase the traces of the prototype or original text ("Urtext"), for he is more or less able to find the way back to it. Nevertheless, this systematic rewriting of the texts to give them a new sense appears not only too modern, but also too complex to be worth doing. A more simple procedure, one that indeed leaves traces but could also prove effective, could be envisaged, where the text was interpolated, but not entirely rewritten. New passages were added, others were suppressed, but little rewriting took place. This was all that was needed to change the intention of a text for most contemporary readers, who were not natural born philologists and did not pay attention to the apparent unevenness and contradictions of the final text. As a matter of fact, they were used to these kind of cut-and-paste works, for writers always profited from the work of their forerunners.

¹³ Afinogenov (2003–2004) 20–33.

¹⁴ Afinogenov (forthcoming). I thank the author for providing me with a first draft of his text.

Marie-France Auzépy demonstrated in her analysis of the *Adversus Constantinum Caballinum* (CC)¹⁵ that a text could be interpolated in such a way. She showed that a synodical letter written by the patriarch John of Jerusalem c. 730 was amplified to form the present CC. The wording of the original synodica, written in the first person and not as a dialogue like the rest of the text, has been preserved in three passages, placed at the beginning, the middle and the end of the CC, exactly the same position Chrysostomides conjectured for the passages preserving the original letter of the three patriarchs.¹⁶

Moreover, the conclusions of Chrysostomides are partly reinforced by the stylistic analysis made in the same volume by Eirene Harvalia-Crook. This researcher established, based on exclusive linguistic criteria, three types of styles in the *Letter*, type I being the most elevated and III the lowest, whereas type II represents a middle way, highly rhetorical and not always grammatically correct. Harvalia-Crook suggests that type I could have been written “by the three patriarchs themselves or their highest secretariat” and types II–III by other scribes of the patriarchal secretariat or later interpolators.

It is not coincidental that type I is represented at the beginning (salutation–§4g) and the end of the *Letter* (§14–15), the parts that Chrysostomides thought to be original. Paragraphs §5a–§6a and §8a–§8f, which pertain to the original *Letter* for Chrysostomides, are excluded by Harvalia-Crook from type I and included in type II. It is difficult to say whether we must consider them original, following Chrysostomides, or not, following Harvalia-Crook. I tend to give more credence to Harvalia-Crook in this respect, for two reasons that will soon be evident, first because they are more rhetorical and not so balanced as the passages of type I, and second because they refer expressly to icons, which are not mentioned at all in the passages of type I.

In the ensuing analysis I will focus on the passages of Harvalia-Crook’s type I, and consider whether they represent the original core of the letter of the three patriarchs. Obviously, no definitive conclusion will ever be reached on this point because of the heterogeneous nature of the work and its complicated transmission. Nevertheless, I hope to add new arguments to the formal analysis of Harvalia-Crook in order to demonstrate that the initial chapters may well have been written by the Melkite patriarchs for Theophilos. In contrast, the opening and closing paragraphs of the work appear to have undergone at least some reworking. We will first reflect on the information carried by the title and the protocol, which provide a dating to the text (836) and present it as the result of the synod summoned in Jerusalem (section 21.2). Then we will consider the historicity of a general synod of the Melkites at this time (section 21.3). Then we will examine the initial chapters of the *Letter*, which most probably preserved the original text, and reflect

¹⁵ Auzépy (1995).

¹⁶ For interpolated passages with references to icon worship again in the middle section of the letters of Pope Gregory II and patriarch Germanos, see Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 91–6.

on the theological stance towards icons that can be deduced from them (section 21.4). Some considerations will follow about the closing of the *Letter* with its mention of the icon of the Virgin and Child (section 21.5). In the following section an explanation will be sought for the patriarchs' appeal to the emperor to reconquer their lands for the empire (section 21.6). Next, we will evaluate the information preserved in the sources about the iconophile stance of some Melkite patriarchs after 843 (section 21.7). Finally, we will consider where the forgery could have been concocted (section 21.8).

21.2 Patchwork in the Letter's Title and Protocol

The title of the *Letter to Theophilos* runs as follows in what the editors consider the oldest extant version of the text:

Ἐπιστολὴ τῶν ἁγιωτάτων πατριαρχῶν, Χριστοφόρου Ἀλεξανδρείας, Ἰὼβ Ἀντιοχείας, Βασιλείου Ἱεροσολύμων πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα Θεόφιλον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως γραφεῖσα ἐν τῇ ἁγίᾳ πόλει Ἱερουσαλήμ¹⁷ ἐν τῇ ἁγίᾳ Ἀναστάσει περὶ τῶν ἁγίων καὶ τιμίων καὶ σεβασμίων εἰκόνων, ἔχουσα ἐν κεφαλίδι τὸν ἅγιον χαρακτῆρα τῆς παναγίας Θεοτόκου Μαρίας ἐξωγραφημένον, ἐν ἀγκάλαις φέρουσα τὸν Σωτῆρα, συναθροισθέντων αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ ἁγίᾳ πόλει, μετὰ μεγάλης συνόδου, τὸν ἀριθμὸν ἐπισκόπων ρπε', ἡγουμένων ιζ', μοναχῶν ,αρνη' μηνὶ Ἀπριλλίῳ ἰνδικτιῶνος ιδ', ἔτους ,ςτμδ'.¹⁸

In the translation by Munitiz:

Letter of the most holy patriarchs, Christophoros of Alexandria, Job of Antioch and Basil of Jerusalem, to the emperor Theophilos of Constantinople, written in the holy city of Jerusalem in the church of the Holy Resurrection, concerning the holy, venerable and revered icons, having at its head the holy representation of the all-holy Theotokos Maria, depicted bearing the Saviour in her arms; they having gathered together in the holy city along with a great synod, the number of bishops being 185, abbots 17, and monks 1153, in the month of April, the 14th indiction, in the year 6344.

Speck sustained that the title was made up of several sources and pointed to possible deficiencies (absence of day number and day of the week in the dating, repetition of the reference to Jerusalem) and alien elements in it (the reference to the icon of Mary was surely interpolated).¹⁹ Gauer for his part centred his analysis on the historicity of the evidence provided by the title: dating, identity of the

¹⁷ Gauer (1994) 2 does not include ἐν τῇ ἁγίᾳ πόλει Ἱερουσαλήμ in the title.

¹⁸ *Letter to Theophilos*, Title.

¹⁹ Speck (1990) 452–4.

patriarchs mentioned, number of participants in the synod and the reference to the icon of Mary. He came to the conclusion that all these data were historically sound, thus arguing on behalf of the title's authenticity.²⁰ Chrysostomides, on her part, rejected the possibility that the title was authentic. First of all, she argued, "the reference to the three patriarchs as ἀγιωτάτων could not have come from the writers themselves". Besides, Theophilos would never have been addressed as "emperor of Constantinople" instead of emperor of the Romans. She further considered that the description of the icon of the Virgin and Child did not pertain to the title and that the names of the patriarchs and the place where the synod was held should appear at the close of the work, where they are lacking. Chrysostomides concluded that all these details pointed to a copyist supplying this kind of information from elsewhere.²¹ Finally, Chrysostomides considered the figures given in the title for the participants in the synod to be unlikely, for such a large gathering could not have taken place in Jerusalem during Arab rule.²²

Her interpretation is again the most detailed and convincing. It is clear that whoever wrote the title did not know the formulaic conventions of the official documents of the period, and could not therefore have been the same person who composed the *Letter*. Moreover, the wording of the title presents some evidence of its patchy character.

To begin with, the "holy city", as Paul Speck pointed out,²³ is mentioned twice in the title as the place where the letter was written and the synod met. This repetition seems odd and unnecessary if the title was composed in one go. Also, the genitives ἐπισκόπων, ἡγουμένων and μοναχῶν are only syntactically sound if we understand them as determinants of συνόδου,²⁴ for another genitive absolute with an implied participle ὄντων would appear more forced. But the accusative of relation τὸν ἀριθμὸν breaks this syntactical sequence, for it is clumsily inserted between συνόδου and ἐπισκόπων, whereas its proper place would be after this last word, to which it refers, and before the number of bishops. To say the least, the construction of this phrase is neither particularly elegant nor fortunate.

Now, Athos Iviron 381 presents a different reading of this second part of the title without the terms that make the difficulties:

... συναθροισθέντων μετὰ μεγάλης συνόδου ἐπισκόπων ρπε', ἡγουμένων ιζ',
μοναχῶν ,αρνη'· μηνι Ἀπριλλίῳ ἰνδικτιῶνος ιδ', ἔτους ,ετμδ' .²⁵

²⁰ Gauer (1994) lxi–lxviii.

²¹ Chrysostomides (1997) xviii–xix.

²² Chrysostomides (1997) xix–xx.

²³ Speck (1990) 453.

²⁴ This is how Gauer (1994) 3 understands the text in his translation. The genitive ἐπισκόπων cannot be the subject of συναθροισθέντων because this place is already taken by αὐτῶν.

²⁵ *Letter to Theophilos*, title.

... whereas 185 bishops, 17 abbots and 1153 monks gathered together along with a great synod, in the month of April, the 14th indiction, in the year 6344.

In the Iviron manuscript it is the syntagma μετὰ μεγάλης συνόδου, which now seems odd, for we should rather expect a locative. It could appear that the Iviron 381, a late manuscript without known model (copied in 1426), tried to mend the textual problems we have noticed by suppressing some terms. But, curiously enough, the syntagma μετὰ μεγάλης συνόδου is suppressed in two other manuscripts, Dublin, Trinity College 185 (beginning of eleventh century) and Athos, Vatopedi 37 (c. 1330), which instead transmit the words omitted by Iviron (i.e., αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ ἁγία πόλει and τὸν ἀριθμὸν). All three manuscripts are part of the same branch of the tradition (β in the terminology of Munitiz), one that depends on a brother manuscript of the oldest copy preserved, the Patmiensis 48 (late ninth or tenth century). As the rest of the manuscripts of the two other branches of the tradition preserve all the missing words of this passage, it is not possible to correct the text of the title according to the readings provided by the manuscripts of branch β.²⁶

Once the patchy character of the title has been made evident, we must consider from where the author could have obtained the information used to compose it. A short comparison with the Slavonic translation is illuminating in this regard. There, a shorter and less informative heading has been preserved, in which the work is qualified as a “manifold letter” (as Afinogenov rightly argues, a translation of the Greek πολύστιχος ἐπιστολή, a name that appears in later Greek manuscripts), the names of the patriarchs are given and the total numbers of the signatories of the document (no synod in Jerusalem is mentioned!) are reckoned as 1455.²⁷ This number is the result of an error in the addition, for 185 bishops, 17 abbots and 1153 monks add up to 1355 participants. This is a clear proof of the derivative character of the Slavonic version.

Curiously enough, the Slavonic version has preserved towards its end a reference to the day (Resurrection Sunday) and place (Jerusalem, “in the temple of the Holy Resurrection on the place of Calvary”) where the synod met, giving again the same erroneous number of participants, 1355. In this same passage the writing of the text is linked to a certain Basil. We will return to this person below,²⁸ but for the moment it suffices to note that the passage does not conclude the work, for some more paragraphs follow: first, a passage where the signatories wish victory, health and prosperity to the emperor; then a sentence where an absolute dating for the synod is given for the first time (“April of the 14th indiction of the year from

²⁶ Munitiz (1997b) xcii.

²⁷ Afinogenov (2003–2004) 25.

²⁸ See section 21.8, where the whole passage is copied in the English translation made by Afinogenov (forthcoming).

the Creation 6344”), thus providing a kind of colophon to the text;²⁹ and finally a long discourse in defence of icon worship, which contains a reference to the painted image of the Virgin and her Son that headed the letter (to this ending we will return in section 21.6).

As we see, the references that appear in the title of the Greek text are dispersed in the Slavonic version between its heading and towards its end. It appears difficult to ascertain which version comes first, for in some points (the reference to Basil or to the temple of Holy Resurrection) the Slavonic text contains more details (although these could be later additions or expansions), but in others, especially concerning the exact numbers of bishops, abbots and monks, it is clearly derivative. Perhaps the safest conclusion is that the Greek and Slavonic versions reworked the original text, providing different headings for a text that lacked any introduction at all. It appears that both versions were based on an original “colophon”, but that the Slavonic version retained it in its original location, thus creating some duplicates with the title, whereas the Greek one suppressed it once the data it contained were re-used for the title.

Let us now consider the protocol of the *Letter*, which follows the title and was called *salutatio* by the editors. It also appears not to be original. The “standard” version of this protocol runs as follows:

Τῷ ἐκ τῆς ἄνωθεν θείας πανσθενοῦς παντοκρατορικῆς δεξιᾶς τοῦ ὑψίστου βασιλέως τῶν βασιλέων, καὶ κυρίου τῶν κυρίων, δι’ οὗ βασιλεῖς βασιλεύουσι, καὶ τύραννοι κρατοῦσι γῆς, δι’ οὗ μεγιστᾶνες μεγαλύνονται, καὶ δυνάσται γράφουσι δικαιοσύνην, δόξῃ καὶ τιμῇ κατεστεμμένω, θεοπροβλήτῳ, θεοστηρίκτῳ, θεοστέπτῳ, φερωνύμῳ βασιλεῖ κρατίστῳ Θεοφίλῳ, νικητῇ τροπαιούχῳ αὐτοκράτορι, αἰωνίῳ αὐγούστῳ, θεοτιμῆτῳ δεσπότῃ, οἱ κατ’ ἐπίνευσιν καὶ πρόσκλησιν τῆς θείας προμηθείας τῆς ὁμοουσίου καὶ ζωαρχικῆς Τριάδος τοὺς οἴκακας τῶν ἀποστολικῶν καὶ πατριαρχικῶν θρόνων, Ἀλεξανδρείας, Ἀντιοχείας, Ἱεροσολύμων, καὶ οἱ μεθ’ ἡμῶν οὐρανομιμήτου ἱεραρχίας τὴν διακόσμησιν, ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν ἡλίου μέχρι δυσμῶν ἐληλαχότες κατέχειν, ἐν Κυρίῳ χαίρειν.

In Munitiz’s translation:

To the most powerful emperor, advanced by God, supported by God, crowned by God, appropriately named Theophilos, crowned in glory and honour by the divine, powerful and almighty right hand from above of the highest King of kings, and lord of lords, by whom kings reign and despots hold sway over the earth, and by whom the great are extolled and rulers decree justice, to the victorious and triumphant sovereign, eternal Augustus and God-honoured despot, we who have been entrusted with the governance of the apostolic and

²⁹ According to Afinogenov (2003–2004) 26 the original Greek colophon can be reconstructed as follows from the formulaic text in Slavonic: ἐγράφη δὲ ταῦτα ἐν τῷ τιμίῳ πατριαρχείῳ τῆς ἁγίας πόλεως Ἱερουσαλήμ, μηνὶ ἀπριλλίῳ ἰνδικτιῶνος ιδ΄, ἔτους ςτμδ΄.

patriarchal thrones of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, with the assent and invitation of divine providence of the consubstantial and life-giving Trinity, and also those who with us have been promoted to occupy the ranks of that hierarchy which imitates the celestial one, from the rising of the sun to its setting, give greetings to him in the Lord.

This *salutatio* cannot be accepted as authentic for several reasons. First of all, there are the titles given to Theophilus, who is mentioned before the actual senders of the text, as was to be expected. Some of these titles can indeed be found in the imperial documents of the period, for example αἰώνιος αὐγουστος or νικητῆς αὐτοκράτωρ, although the Amorians seem to have adopted a sober approach, as is made evident by the *Letter to Louis the Pious* (“Michaël et Theophilus, fideles in ipso Deo imperatores Romanorum”). More telling is the fact that our *salutatio* addresses the emperor with a long series of epithets that appear in part to be a rhetorical development out of the name of the emperor: θεοπρόβλητος, θεοστήρικτος, θεόστεπτος, θεοτίμητος. Moreover, the use of a title like δεσπότης, albeit present on the coins of the reign of Theophilus, seems only to have been used for his son and co-emperor Constantine.³⁰ One might attribute these intitulations to the lack of experience of the Melkite chancellery in Jerusalem (who had sparse contact with the imperial power at Constantinople), or even to an exaggerated will to flatter the emperor, but the general impression speaks for a reconstruction of the imperial titles by some inexperienced forger.

Then, the three patriarchs present themselves without names or titles as the senders of the text, which is alien to the practices of official documents of this kind. They are also strangely introduced as governing the Church “from the rising sun to its setting” (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν ἡλίου μέχρι δυσμῶν), again a rhetorical form which does not say very much.³¹ Along with them some unspecified members of the church hierarchy appear as senders of the text, perhaps also as signatories, but their number or status is not given. Finally, the closing ἐν Κυρίῳ χαίρειν does not seem adequate for a protocol, but for an ordinary letter.

Before looking for an explanation for this anomalous protocol, we will first consider another piece of text in the *Letter* transmitted by Athos Iviron 381. Along with the title already mentioned and the ensuing *salutatio* (both with minor differences from the “standard” version of the *Letter*), this manuscript also contains an interesting passage towards the end of the work, which no other source has preserved. The passage appears like a kind of eschatocol and reads as follows:

³⁰ See Grierson (1973) 406–51, Treadgold (1975), Füeg (2007) 25–8, 71–3 and Lightfoot (2011).

³¹ Unless it can be adduced as proof that the original text referred somehow to an ecumenical synod of the church gathering at Constantinople and including western and eastern provinces, and not just to an assembly of the Melkite patriarchates.

Ταῦτα ἡμεῖς, Χριστόφορος Ἀλεξανδρίας, Ἰὼβ Ἀντιοχείας, Βασίλειος Ἱεροσολύμων, σὺν ἐπισκόποις ρπε´, ἡγουμένοις ἑπτακαίδεκα, μονάζουσι χιλίους ἑκατὸν πενήκοντα πρὸς τοῖς τρισί, συγγραψάμενοι ἀπεστάλκαμέν σοι, κράτιστε βασιλεῦ, μετὰ καὶ ὑπογραφῶν ἐχουσῶν ἐκάστου ὄνομα καὶ τόπον ἐπισκοπῆς, καὶ μητροπόλεως καὶ μονῆς καὶ χώρας. Ὁ δὲ συντεθεὶς παρ´ ἡμῶν λίβελλος ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως ἔχει οὕτως·

We Christophoros of Alexandria, Job of Antioch, Basil of Jerusalem, with the one hundred and eighty-five bishops, seventeen abbots, one thousand one hundred and fifty-three monks, wrote and sent you this letter, mighty emperor, with the signatures of each participant, name and place of his bishopric, metropolis, monastery and village. The statement of the orthodox faith composed by us contains the following:³²

This direct address to the emperor is also not original, because neither the senders nor the addressee have any titles or epithets given. The passage seems to introduce a subscriptio “with the signatures of each participant, name and place of his bishopric, metropolis, monastery and village”, but in fact the “statement of the orthodox” faith (λίβελλος ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως) it introduces follows the passage in the Ivron manuscript, thus closing its version of *Letter*.³³ Our “subscriptio” turns out to be a sort of transitional piece of dubious nature.

The confession of faith preserved in the Ivron does not appear in the “standard” version. This text is different from the previous long text of the *Letter* that was copied before in the Ivron (to a great extent coincidental with the “standard” version), for this is referred to with the initial ταῦτα and the aorist ἀπεστάλκαμεν, whereas the sentence presenting the λίβελλος begins with a δὲ (which clearly marks a transition to a new topic) and uses the present tense (ἔχει). If we follow the Ivron manuscript, it appears that the patriarchs were sending two different kinds of text to the emperor, an initial exposition of their theological arguments, constituting the main text of the *Letter* with the signatures of the senders, and a shorter expositio fidei. This seems to be a strange procedure at first sight, unless we surmise some kind of reworking for this untypical “subscriptio”.

Interestingly enough, this “subscriptio” contains the names of the three patriarchs, Christopher, Job and Basil, who were not mentioned in the salutation of the “standard” version. These patriarchs, the same whose names appear in the spurious title, were in fact contemporary to each other and to the emperor Theophilos. Christopher, who was seriously ill in the last years of his reign and could not move, may have been in charge as late as 848.³⁴ Job probably reigned for

³² Munitiz et al. (1997) 124–5.

³³ Munitiz et al. (1997) 125–31.

³⁴ Gauer (1994) lxiii and Nasrallah (1987) 16 and 23. See, however, below in section 21.7 for patriarch Sophronios of Alexandria ruling since 836.

a very long period, perhaps from 799 to 843.³⁵ And Basil may have reigned from 821 to 839 or even until the late 840s.³⁶ Thus, theoretically, they could all have met in a synod held in Jerusalem, as the title says, in the year since creation 6344 and the 14th indiction, corresponding to 836. This coincidence is important not only because it proves that the data provided by the title fit in well with the scant information we now have at our disposal, but also because they could not have been easily forged in Constantinople, at a time when contemporary Byzantines, even those as well informed as Theodore Stoudite, did not always know the names of the Melkite patriarchs.³⁷

On balance we can conclude that title and protocol as well as the “subscriptio” of the Iviron manuscript are spurious and represent a kind of patchwork of references taken from different sources. However, at the same time, some of the details given seem to be authentic, so it is quite possible that they were somehow borrowed from the text of the original letter. This is an important point, for it will enable us in section 21.3 to inquire further about the historical background of a Jerusalemite synod of the Melkite Church summoned in the time of the Abbasids.

Anyway, one problem remains to be dealt with before we proceed to consider the historicity of such a council. If we admit that the original wording of the *Letter* was preserved in the initial chapters, where, as we shall see in section 21.4 below, the patriarchs seem to adopt an aniconic stance, why then should the forger who expanded and interpolated this original text not also have copied the original protocol of the *Letter*? Why did he choose instead to compose his own title and introduction for the text of the *Letter* if the original lay at hand? Was the original protocol, a diplomatic piece of a neutral stance, not likely to lend more credence to his forgery than the spurious patchwork he wrote to introduce the *Letter*? How could he not have been conscious that his own rewording of the protocol could not but betray his forger’s hand?

Otto Kresten suggested to me a likely explanation for this situation, one that takes into account the habitual procedures of the Byzantine imperial chancellery. Kresten has rightly seen that some documents of the imperial chancellery as preserved in the acts of the *Constantinopolitanum III*³⁸ seem to present a (partially) reconstructed protocol. The cause lay in the fact that the copyist who wrote the acts of the council and was charged to include there a version of the imperial document no longer had the original document at his disposal, but had to rely on the official copy entered in the imperial register book. There, most of the documents were copied without any protocol because it was obviously known to the clerks, who copied dozens of such documents under the reign of a given emperor with identical opening and closing parts. If we apply this conclusion to our case, we can conjecture that the forger of our text took as the basis for his

³⁵ Nasrallah (1986–1987) 60, (1987) 16. For Job see also Chapter 1.3.

³⁶ Gauer (1994) lxiii and Nasrallah (1987) 16–17.

³⁷ Signes Codoñer (2014).

³⁸ As edited by Riedinger (1990–1995).

work a copy of the *Letter* entered in the patriarchal register and lacking a protocol. Perhaps the register included some cursory indications about date, signatories and scope of the document that our forger developed into the actual title and protocol of the present version of the *Letter*.

A serious objection to this hypothesis arises from the secret character of the original *Letter*, a question we will discuss at some length in section 21.6 below. This would imply the existence of a secret register of the patriarchate, from which our forger copied the main text of the *Letter*. There is nothing objectionable per se in this supposition, but it is just a *petitio principii* and perhaps other alternatives could be envisaged. Since some parts of the expanded *Letter* point to Constantinople as the place where the interpolated text was written, as we shall see in section 21.8, it is then conceivable that some palatine clerk in the capital succeeded in making a partial copy of the original *Letter* (without protocol and eschatocol) from the imperial register for incoming letters, where it was entered on its reception after 836. The original *Letter* could even have been copied without introducing and concluding parts in the incoming register. This copy would provide the basis for the interpolations of the forger.

21.3 The Jerusalemite Synod of the Melkites

As we have seen, the title of the *Letter to Theophilos* declares that the text was written by the three patriarchs in Jerusalem, where the synod gathered in April 836. Supposedly 185 bishops, 17 abbots and 1153 monks attended there. The same numbers appear again in what we called the “*subscriptio*” of Iviron 381.³⁹ The total number of participants given in the Slavonic version, 1455 (instead of 1355) is the result of an error in the reckoning, as we mentioned above.

The only further source that mentions the existence of a synod held in Jerusalem at the time is the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*. The historical significance of this *Life* will be dealt with in Chapter 22, but for now suffice it to say that it contains many historical impossibilities, among them a narrative of the conversion of the caliph to Christianity through the agency of Theodore, the monk of Mar Sabas and bishop of Edessa.⁴⁰ His nephew Basil claims to write Theodore’s *Life* as direct witness of his deeds. There are in the text no exact dates for the events mentioned, with the exception of a visit Theodore paid to the emperors Theodora and Michael in Constantinople,⁴¹ therefore dated after 842. The passionate defence of icons made by Theodore⁴² also places the writing of the work in the second half of the ninth century.⁴³

³⁹ Munitiz et al. (1997) 124.

⁴⁰ On Theodore see *PmbZ* #7683.

⁴¹ *Life of Theodore of Edessa* chapter 84 (89.5–7)

⁴² *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, chapters 46–7 and 86.

⁴³ See however Binggeli (2010) and below.

According to the *Life*, at the time when Theodore was monk in the Mar Sabas monastery in Palestine, during Passion Week and Easter (κατ' αὐτὰς δὴ τὰς ἡμέρας τῶν σεβασμίων παθῶν τοῦ κυρίου καὶ τῆς ζωητρόφου καὶ ἀγίας αὐτοῦ ἀναστάσεως), “it happened that the patriarch of Antioch arrived in the Holy City with his bishops” (ἐγένετο καὶ τὸν πατριάρχην Ἀντιοχείας ἐν τῇ ἁγίᾳ παραγενέσθαι πόλει σὺν ἅμα τοῖς ὑπ' αὐτὸν ἐπισκόποις), “partly for seeing and worshipping the Sepulchre which sheds and receives life” (τοῦτο μὲν κατὰ θεὰν καὶ προσκύνησιν τοῦ ζωηρροῦ καὶ ζωοδόχου τάφου), “partly also for some ecclesiastical matters” (τοῦτο δὲ καὶ διὰ τινὰς ἐκκλησιαστικὰς ὑποθέσεις). The nature of these “ecclesiastical matters” is not indicated in the text, although it is further said that when both the patriarchs of Jerusalem and Antioch were assembled there along with their bishops (παρόντων δὲ ἀμφοτέρων τῶν πατριαρχῶν καὶ τῶν ὑπ' αὐτοῦς ἀρχιερέων), the clergy and laymen of Edessa came into the presence of the holy synod (προσηλθὼν τῇ ἱερᾷ συνόδῳ) with a petition, namely that a new bishop of Edessa be urgently appointed to avoid the prevailing dissension in the see after the death of the last holder.⁴⁴ The patriarch of Jerusalem, after exchanging some words with his colleague from Antioch, recommends Theodore for the post. The holy synod (ἡ ἱερὰ σύνοδος) agrees, as do the representatives of Edessa, so that “Theodore is appointed bishop of Edessa with the common consent of the two patriarchs and the whole godly synod” (κοινῇ γνώμῃ τῶν δύο πατριαρχῶν καὶ πάσης τῆς θείας συνόδου ψηφίζεται Θεόδωρος ἐπίσκοπος Ἐδέσσης).⁴⁵ Then the patriarch of Jerusalem writes a letter to Theodore ordering him to come into their presence as soon as possible. Theodore appears before the two patriarchs and, after some resistance, is finally persuaded to assume the post. He is then ordained on Holy Thursday by the patriarch of Antioch during a mass celebrated by the two patriarchs and many other bishops (τῶν ἀμφοτέρων λειτουργούντων πατριαρχῶν μετὰ πολλῶν ἐτέρων ἐπισκόπων).⁴⁶ During the religious service a white dove descended upon the head of the new bishop, the *Life* tells us further, thus revealing God’s sanction of Theodore’s election. Theodore spends several more days in Jerusalem, leaving the city for Mar Sabas on the Monday of Holy Week.⁴⁷

The *Life* clearly refers to a synod held in Jerusalem with the attendance of the Melkite patriarchs of Jerusalem and Antioch and their bishops. Neither the names of the patriarchs nor the number of the bishops present in the synod are given. An approximate dating for the event is not given either, although it could fit in well with the year 836 when, according to the title of the *Letter*, a synod met in Jerusalem: Theodore supposedly visited Constantinople as ordained bishop between 842 and 856, during the regency of Theodora.

The reason for holding a synod in Jerusalem during Holy Week is also not specified beyond the “ecclesiastical matters” adduced as grounds for it. Vasiliév

⁴⁴ *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, chapter 41 (35.19 – 36.10).

⁴⁵ *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, chapters 41–2 (36.11– 37.6).

⁴⁶ *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, chapter 42 (37.6– 38.3).

⁴⁷ *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, chapter 42 (38.3–19).

had no doubt that the compilation of a letter to the emperor Theophilos on his iconoclastic policy was among the matters dealt with by the Melkite representatives in those days.⁴⁸ But in that case, why should the author of the *Life* have remained silent about this point, when Theodore is openly depicted as a fierce partisan of icon worship in several passages of the work? Either the author of the *Life* ignored the real concern of the synod or it had nothing to do with images. The possibility must be seriously entertained that the synod met simply to regulate internal affairs of the Melkite Church in the face of the dissension prevailing in some dioceses. In fact, the clergy and laymen of Edessa who appealed to the synod describe in alarming terms the decaying state of their see, upon which heretics of many sorts became active after the last bishop's death (πολλοὶ ἐπετέθησαν αἰρετικοὶ τῇ πολιτείᾳ ἡμῶν). These heretics are depicted as followers of Nestorios, Severos or Eutyches, who "poison many souls with their deadly venom" (πολλὰς ψυχὰς πληροῦσι τοῦ θανατηφόρου ἰοῦ αὐτῶν) and "carry them away to their complete destruction" (πρὸς ἀπώλειαν συναρπάζουσι).⁴⁹

The patriarch of Antioch is said to come to Jerusalem first of all to visit the Holy City and its most famous shrine, the Church of the Sepulchre. It is not a dogmatic debate in the first instance which moves the patriarch to come to Jerusalem, but a kind of pilgrimage, for it also takes place during Holy Week. This was certainly the best period to visit Jerusalem and it is just a natural coincidence that the synod mentioned in the *Letter* assembled in April of 836, and accordingly also during Holy Week.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the *Life of Theodore* records a synod of the Melkite Church in Jerusalem, where the patriarchs of Antioch and Jerusalem gathered in the company of their bishops. As the only other synod of the Melkite Church known at the time was the one mentioned in the title of the *Letter*, the identification of both lies to hand, especially as the chronology does not stand in the way and this kind of meeting was anything but usual. The absence of the patriarch of Alexandria in the report of the *Life* was easily explained by Vasiliev by the fact that he was stricken by paralysis in the last years of his reign, so that he was represented in the synod by the bishop Peter.⁵⁰

Now, considering the dependence of the Melkite patriarchs on Byzantium,⁵¹ it is unlikely that they took the step of summoning a synod on the very sensitive issue of icon worship, thus challenging the imperial church without any cogent reason (no deals with Rome are mentioned on this occasion).⁵² I think therefore

⁴⁸ Vasiliev (1942–1944) 177.

⁴⁹ *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, chapter 41 (36.1–9).

⁵⁰ Vasiliev (1942–1944) 122.

⁵¹ According to Theoph. 430, Theodore, the patriarch of Antioch, frequently (συχνῶς) communicated Arab affairs by letter to emperor Constantine V.

⁵² The supposed Melkite iconophile synods of the eighth century are attested in Latin sources and in the acts of Nikaia II, but many uncertainties remain about their representativity. The Greek iconophile Sabbaites, very influential at the Roman curia of the

that if a synod of the Melkite Church assembled in Jerusalem in 836, it was not to provoke the emperor with a defence of icon worship, but probably to deal with some internal affairs of the Melkite Church, as we suggested above and the *Life of Theodore of Edessa* expressly says. Only in this case could we accept the high numbers of the participants in the synod. But in any case, it must have been an exceptional occasion, prompted by exceptional circumstances.

The year 836 was certainly a good time to address the emperor, for, as we already saw in Chapter 15, Theophilus led victorious campaigns in western Armenia between 834 and 836, which could have been grounds enough for the patriarchs to make an approach to the emperor. In fact, in a passage of the *Letter* it is said that the patriarchs “rejoice and take pleasure in the acts of bravery and prowess of your [Theophilus’] triumphant divinely granted victory”.⁵³ Although the victorious campaign of Theophilus in 837 in Sozopetra, which came afterwards, could have provided an even better occasion for the writing of the *Letter*, a dating of 836 also seems possible. Nevertheless, more precise circumstances than the emperor’s victories were required to assemble a council in Jerusalem. The only likely explanation is an appeal by Constantinople itself, caused perhaps by the summoning of a council in the imperial capital.

The question now is whether evidence for a council in Constantinople at the time, obviously an iconoclast one, can be found. Whereas it is certainly unlikely that an iconophile synod in 836 passed unnoticed in iconophile propaganda after 843 (including the *Letter* itself, except for the title), icon worshippers would have had every reason to silence an iconoclastic gathering during Theophilus’ reign. The absence of contemporary iconophile writings during the reign of Theophilus (Theodore Stoudites died in 826) prevents us from verifying this hypothesis. However, Chrysostomides ventured that the gathering of Jerusalem “was a direct response to the one envisaged in Constantinople a year later”.⁵⁴ Let us now consider this possibility.

The *Synodicon vetus* does indeed speak of a Constantinopolitan synod in the patriarchate of John the Grammarian.⁵⁵ According to this source, the emperor Theophilus, “having organized a godless assembly in Blachernai, anathematized the worshippers of the revered icons” (ἄθεον ἐν Βλαχέρναις κατασκευάσας συνέδριον τοὺς προσκυνητὰς τῶν σεβασμίων εἰκόνων ἀναθεμάτισε). The importance of this source, written according to the editors “not long after 867”,⁵⁶ is not to be ignored. Although some of the information provided for older councils is doubtful or imaginary, the *Synodicon* had no special reason for attributing to Theophilus the

time, may have amplified the actual support of the Melkite prelates to icon worship. See Signes Codoñer (2013c).

⁵³ *Letter to Theophilus*, 3d: χαίρομεν καὶ γεγῆθαμεν ἐν ταῖς ἀνδραγαθίαις καὶ ἀριστείαις τῆς ὑμῶν τροπαιοῦχου θεοδώρητου νίκης.

⁵⁴ Chrysostomides (1997) xxi.

⁵⁵ *Synodicon vetus* §155.

⁵⁶ Duffy and Parker (1979) xiii.

summoning of a synod different from the one that Leo V had already called in 815, previously referred to by the author.⁵⁷ It is the meticulousness of the author of the *Synodicon*, who intended to review all the synods of the church, “both orthodox and heretical” (ὀρθοδόξους καὶ αἰρετικὰς), that perhaps explains why he is the single source recording this gathering.

About the dating of this supposed synod we are given no further clues from the *Synodicon* except for the fact that it happened at a time when John the Grammarian was patriarch, that is to say, after 837 or 838 if we accept that John ascended to the patriarchal throne according to the *communis opinio*, although there are other possible alternatives.⁵⁸ This appears to contradict the dating of the *Letter to Theophilos* to 836. However, the *Letter* informs us, in a passage that does not pertain to the original synodical letter, that the patriarch Antonios I Kassymatas, the predecessor of John, fell seriously ill “after their falsely named and blasphemous synod” (μετὰ τὴν ψευδώνυμον θεόμαχον σύνοδον αὐτῶν).⁵⁹ This would speak for the synod being held during the patriarchate of Antonios, not of John, and be in accord with the dating of 836 provided by the title of the *Letter*. Warren Treadgold argued that the synod could only be conceived in connection with an edict against the iconophiles issued by the emperor in June 833 and frequently referred to in the sources.⁶⁰ However, it could also be that the council was summoned to back previous decisions taken by the emperor.

In order to resolve the contradiction, Chrysostomides suggests that Antonios had started with the preparations for the synod in 836. He supposedly fell ill at this time, precisely when the three Melkite patriarchs wrote the *Letter to Theophilos*. And as Antonios died before January 837, it was finally John who summoned the council.⁶¹ This explanation does not fit in well with the text of the *Letter*, which says that Antonios fell ill *after the synod*, not *after summoning the synod*.⁶² Moreover, Antonios seems to have fallen ill as a result of his celebrating an impious synod, punished by God. The *Letter* even adds that Jesus has delayed

⁵⁷ *Synodicon vetus* §154.

⁵⁸ For a dating of the appointment of John either in January 837 or April 838 see Grumel (1935), Treadgold (1979b) 178–9 and Pratsch (1999c) 165. See however Treadgold (1988) 436, note 386 for a dating of the council to 833. According to Th. Cont. III.26 (121.6–7), John was crowned patriarch on 21 April, a Sunday. Such dates coincide only in 827 (Easter), 832 and 838. As 827 seems too early, for John the Grammarian took part in embassies to Baghdad in Theophilos’ reign before being appointed patriarch, there remain only 832 and 838 as possible dates if we accept the wording of Th. Cont. See Signes (1995) 535–7. See also Chapters 19.1 and 24.1 (note 28) for more arguments favouring an earlier patriarchate of John.

⁵⁹ *Letter to Theophilos* 10.h.

⁶⁰ Treadgold (1988) 280–81 and 436, note 386. For the version of the edict in Th. Cont. III.10 (99.4–100.23) see also Signes Codoñer (1995) 419–24.

⁶¹ Chrysostomides (1997) xxi and note 24.

⁶² In fact, Chrysostomides translates the passage in 10.h as if the council had finished at the time: “once their falsely named and blasphemous synod had been held”.

his death in order to give him occasion for repentance (καίρὸν ἴσως διδοῦς μετανοίας). Pratsch suggested that Antonios' illness must have lasted a long time, for otherwise the *Letter* would not have made reference to it. He even hazards that John was appointed synkellos of Antonios in the winter of 829/830 in view of his serious disability.⁶³

We do not have any further information about this iconoclastic council, except for some reports of debates between the emperor and iconophile saints, which could be connected with the proceedings of a synod.⁶⁴ But, as the matter stands, an iconoclastic council in Constantinople summoned by Theophilos can be considered not only a historical plausibility, but also a necessity after the wavering political and religious situation during the reign of Michael II. The central role probably assumed by the emperor in this council, which only the clergy of the Constantinopolitan patriarchate attended (surely not the pope and the eastern patriarchs), made the gathering appear as just the expression of the imperial will and not as a council proper. The lack of dogmatic innovations could also have made it unnecessary for later authors to refer to it.

A synod of Jerusalem may have been summoned by the Melkite authorities to give an adequate answer to a possible demand from Constantinople. In fact, the text sent to Theophilos was accompanied not only by the signature of the three patriarchs, but also by that of the other participants in the synod, if we pay credence to the "subscriptio" of the Ivirion manuscript, where it is said that the text was accompanied "with the signatures of each participant, name and place of his bishopric, metropolis, monastery and village". The salutatio to the emperor as preserved in the "standard" version of the *Letter* names as senders of the letter, along with the patriarchs themselves, "those who have been promoted to occupy the ranks of that hierarchy which imitates the celestial one, from the rising of the sun to its setting".⁶⁵ Numbers are not given in this salutatio.

But even admitting the importance of the occasion, figures of almost two hundred bishops and more than a thousand monks are inconceivable in Palestine at the time. Consider for example that the iconoclastic council of Hiereia, with 338 participants,⁶⁶ boasted about its high numbers.⁶⁷ This was surely a reason for congregating up to 252 bishops in Nikaia II and an unidentified number of monks.⁶⁸ It is significant that in the *Life of Theodore of Edessa* Theodore gives the numbers of the participants of the seven ecumenical councils (350 for Nikaia II),

⁶³ Pratsch (1999c) 165, note 47.

⁶⁴ Th. Cont. III.11–12 (101.1–102.18).

⁶⁵ *Letter to Theophilos*, salutatio.

⁶⁶ Nikaia II (Mansi) vol. 13, col. 232 E.

⁶⁷ Nikaia II (Mansi) vol. 13, col. 233 A.

⁶⁸ In the acts of Nikaia II the bishops are listed by name; after them, the presence of εὐλαβεστάτων ἀρχιμανδρίτων ἡγουμένων τε καὶ μοναχῶν is recorded; see Lambertz (2008) 18–37.

although the text had previously said nothing about the exact numbers of the Jerusalemite synod.⁶⁹

However, the very precise numbers of the participants were perhaps not just invented *ex nihilo*. The suggestion made by Duchesne and developed by Gauer,⁷⁰ that the high numbers given do not correspond to the actual participants in the synod but make up the sum of the pilgrims coming to the Holy City with the retinue and dependent clergy of the three patriarchs, certainly appears unfounded. But we may accept that the interpolator of the *Letter* took the numbers of participants from some official records of the Melkite Church (this explains the high number of monks) and made of them the subscribers of a regular synod. He could thus have transformed a synod of some relevance into an “ecumenical” gathering of the Melkite Church.

21.4 The Unmentioned Icons in the Original Core of the Letter

As we have seen above in section 21.1, Eirene Harvalia-Crook distinguished three sections in the *Letter* according to three levels of style (types I–III), although she defended the unity of the work and argued that the unevenness could be explained as a result of several authors with different linguistic competences working together. However, the fact that the part that according to her was written in high style (salutation and §§1–4, 14–15) coincides to a great extent with the part Chrysostomides considered the authentic and original text (salutation and §§1–6a, 8a–f and 14–15) seems to reinforce the suspicion of the latter scholar that only the introductory chapters and the conclusion constituted the original core of the *Letter*.

That these initial chapters, up to the end of §4, represented the original and genuine text of the *Letter* may be supported by a further argument not considered hitherto. This is the absence of any allusion to icons in them. Indeed, the first reference to an icon appears only in 5d–e, where coins are mentioned, supposedly issued by Constantine I with the cross and an effigy of Christ. As is well known, no such coins ever existed.⁷¹ It also seems strange that the mention of such coins appears immediately after a passage where Constantine is praised for the destruction of the pagan idols, an evocation of the iconoclastic stance of the emperor reflected in the work of his panegyrist Eusebius of Kaisareia.⁷²

But there is more than that. In the initial chapters of the *Letter* the word εἰκών (*eikon*) does appear, but always used in a figurative sense, never as a reference to actual icons. For example, it is said that Christ was an image (εἰκών) of God

⁶⁹ *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, chapter 47 (44.24–45.8).

⁷⁰ Duchesne (1912–1913) 224 and Gauer (1994) lxiv–lxvi.

⁷¹ Walter (1997) lxxv.

⁷² See for example Eusebius of Cesarea, *Life of Constantine* III.48 and a selection of his texts in Thümmel (1992) 282–7.

(§1.a); that man was made “in the image” (κατ’εικόνα) of God (§1.d); or that the emperor is the image of the celestial empire (οὐρανοῦ βασιλείας εικόνα) (§4.e).

Even more interesting is a passage towards the beginning of the *Letter* that is worth reproducing in full:

Κεκάθηκεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θρόνου τῆς μεγαλωσύνης τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ Πατὴρ ἐν τοῖς οὐράνοις, πάντα τὰ σύμβολα τῶν σωτηρίων αὐτοῦ παθημάτων τῆς θείας ἐνανθρωπήσεως [...] ἐγκαταλείψας πρὸς τὸ ἀνεξάλειπτον καὶ ἀειμνημόνευτον ἔχειν τῆς αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ πολιτείας αὐτοῦ τὰ γνωρίσματα, ὅπως μὴ τὰ χρονία παραδρομῆ, λήθης βυθοῖς τὰ καλὰ ἀμαυρωθῶσιν, ἀλλὰ τυποῦσθαι μὲν καὶ ἐξεικονίζεσθαι ἐν ἡμῖν διὰ λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας τοῦ θεοῦ βαπτίσματος τὴν ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ γεγονοῦσαν θείαν βάπτισιν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἀδαμίου γένους ῥύψιν τε καὶ ἀνάπλασιν, καὶ τῆς προσφορᾶς τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ, τῶν σωτηρίων αὐτοῦ παθημάτων τὴν ἀνάμνησιν, καταγγέλλειν ὡς γέγραπται, ὥστε οὖν, ὡς ἂν ἐσθίητε τὸν ἄρτον τοῦτον καὶ τὸ ποτήριον τοῦτο πίνητε, τὸν θάνατον τοῦ Κυρίου καταγγέλλετε, καὶ τὴν ἀνάστασιν αὐτοῦ ὁμολογεῖτε, ἄχρις οὗ ἂν ἔλθῃ, ὥστε καὶ πρὸς βεβαιότεραν καὶ ἀσφαλεστέραν τῶν τελομένων ἱερῶν συμβόλων πίστιν καὶ βεβαίαν ἐλπίδα τοῦ ἐν μορφῇ τῇ καθ’ ἡμᾶς γεγονότος καὶ υἱοῦ ἀνθρώπου χρηματίσαντος.⁷³

The text could be rendered as follows:⁷⁴

He then took His seat on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty of God the Father in heaven, leaving behind all the symbols of the salvific sufferings of His divine inhumanisation ... , in order that the tokens of His life in the world and in the flesh be indelible and ever-remembered, so that with the lapse of time these benefits should not perish in the depths of forgetfulness, but the ablation which took place in the Jordan, for the sake of the purification and reformation of Adam’s kind, be modelled and portrayed in us by the waters of regeneration of the divine baptism, and the remembrance of His salvific sufferings by the offering of his body, as it is written that he proclaimed, for as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup you declare the death of the Lord, and you confess His resurrection till He come, and the result of this was to establish a firmer and securer faith in the consecrated holy symbols and an unshakable hope in the one who took our form and who was the son of man.

Although the passage is problematic,⁷⁵ the general sense seems to be clear. It is pointed out that the ablation (βάπτισιν) of Christ in the Jordan and his Passion on

⁷³ *Letter to Theophilus* 1g–h.

⁷⁴ We take as a basis for this translation Munitiz et al. (1997), with some minor changes.

⁷⁵ We have substituted καταγγέλλειν, attested in the mss., for the καταγγέλλει of the eds.

the Cross “are modelled and portrayed in us” (τυποῦσθαι μὲν καὶ ἐξεικονίζεσθαι ἐν ἡμῖν) by the Baptism and the Eucharist, that is, “the waters of regeneration of the divine baptism... and the offering of his body”. It seems as if the author wanted to stress that the two sacraments were the true images or representation of God in contrast to the material icons made by human hands. The argument sounds iconoclastic. Moreover, the *exclusive* use of iconic vocabulary for the Eucharist *in a figurative sense* must not actually be considered an argument in favour of the iconophile character of the text, but rather as evidence of its iconoclast stance.⁷⁶ We can quote here a well-known passage of the iconoclastic council of Hiereia in 754, as reproduced in the Acts of the Nikaian Council of 787. There, both the identification of the Eucharist as the true image of Christ and the use of iconic vocabulary are combined in the same way as in the passage of the *Letter*. It is worth copying the whole passage along with the English translation made by Daniel Sahas:

Εὐφρανθήτωσαν καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσθωσαν καὶ παρρησιασζέσθωσαν οἱ τὴν ἀληθῆ τοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰκόνα εἰλικρινεστάτῃ ψυχῇ ποιοῦντες καὶ ποθοῦντες καὶ σεβόμενοι, καὶ εἰς σωτηρίαν ψυχῆς καὶ σώματος προφερόμενοι· ἦν αὐτὸς ὁ ἱεροτελεστής καὶ Θεός, τὸ ἡμῶν ἐξ ἡμῶν ὀλικῶς ἀναλαβόμενος φύραμα, κατὰ τὸν καρῖον τοῦ ἔκουσίου πάθους εἰς τύπον καὶ ἀνάμνησιν ἐνεργεστάτην τοῖς αὐτοῦ μυσταῖς παραδέδωκε. μέλλον γὰρ αὐτὸν ἔκουσίως ἐκδιδοῖναι τῷ αἰδίμῳ καὶ ζωοποιῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ, λαβὼν τὸν ἄρτον εὐλόγησε, καὶ εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασε, καὶ μεταδοὺς εἶπε· λάβετε, φάγετε εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν. τοῦτό μού ἐστι τὸ σῶμα. ὁμοίως καὶ τὸ ποτήριον μεταδοὺς εἶπε· τοῦτό μού ἐστι τὸ αἷμα· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν, ὡς οὐκ ἄλλου εἶδους ἐπιλεχθέντος παρ’ αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ ὑπ’ οὐρανόν, ἢ τύπου, εἰκονίσαι τὴν αὐτοῦ σάρκωσιν δυναμένου, ἰδοῦ οὖν ἡ εἰκὼν τοῦ ζωοποιῶ σώματος αὐτοῦ, ἡ ἐντίμως καὶ τετιμημένως πραπτομένη. τί γὰρ ἐμηχανήσατο ἐν τούτῳ ὁ πάνσοφος Θεός; οὐχ ἕτερόν τι, ἢ δεῖξαι καὶ τρανώσαι φανερώς ἡμῖν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὸ πραγματευθὲν μυστήριον ἐν τῇ κατ’ αὐτὸν οἰκονομίᾳ· ὅτι ὥσπερ ὁ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἀνελάβετο, ὕλη μόνη ἐστὶν ἀνθρωπίνης οὐσίας κατὰ πάντα τελείας, μὴ χαρακτηριζούσης ἰδιοσύστατον πρόσωπον, ἵνα μὴ προσθήκη προσώπου ἐν τῇ θεότητι παρεμπέση· οὕτω καὶ τὴν εἰκόνα ὕλην ἐξαιρετον, ἥγουν ἄρτου οὐσίαν προσέταξεν προσφέρεσθαι, μὴ σχηματίζουσαν ἀνθρώπου μορφήν, ἵνα μὴ εἰδωλολατρεία παρειαχθῇ. ὥσπερ οὖν τὸ κατὰ φύσιν τοῦ Χριστοῦ σῶμα ἅγιον, ὡς θεωθέν· οὕτως δῆλον καὶ τὸ θέσει, ἥτοι ἡ εἰκὼν αὐτοῦ ἁγία, ὡς διὰ τινος ἁγιασμοῦ χάριτι θεουμένη. τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ ἐπραγματεύσατο, ὡς ἐφημεν, ὁ δεσπότης Χριστὸς, ὅπως καθάπερ τὴν σάρκα, ἦν ἀνέλαβε, τῷ οικείῳ κατὰ φύσιν ἁγιασμῷ ἐξ αὐτῆς ἐνώσεως ἐθέωσεν, ὁμοίως καὶ

⁷⁶ John the Grammarian used, as expected, expressions like εἰκονισμοῖς καὶ χρωματουργικὸν τεράστιον in a negative sense in the fragments of an anti-rhetorical attributed to him, but he also speaks of “representing the man by the logical discourse” (τὸν ... ἄνθρωπον ... χαρακτηρίζεσθαι ... τῇ ἐκ λόγων ὑφηγήσει). See Gouillard (1966) esp. 173–5. For the Eucharistic doctrine of the iconoclasts see especially Gero (1975), but also Corrigan (1992) 51–61 and Baranov (2010).

τὸν τῆς εὐχαριστίας ἄρτον, ὡς ἀψευδῆ εἰκόνα τῆς φυσικῆς σαρκὸς διὰ τῆς τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος ἐπιφοιτήσεως ἀγιαζόμενον, θεῖον σῶμα εὐδόκησε γίνεσθαι, μεσιτεύοντος τοῦ ἐν μετενέξει ἐκ τοῦ κοινοῦ πρὸς τὸ ἅγιον τὴν ἀναφορὰν ποιουμένου ιερῆως. λοιπὸν ἢ κατὰ φύσιν ἔμψυχος καὶ νοερὰ σὰρξ τοῦ κυρίου ἐχρίσθη πνεύματι ἁγίῳ τὴν θεότητα. ὡσαύτως καὶ ἡ θεοπαράδοτος εἰκὼν τῆς σαρὸς αὐτοῦ, ὁ θεὸς ἄρτος ἐπληρώθη πνεύματος ἁγίου σὺν τῷ ποτηρίῳ τοῦ ζωηφόρου αἵματος τῆς πλευρᾶς αὐτοῦ. αὕτη οὖν ἀποδέδεικται ἀψευδῆς εἰκὼν τῆς ἐνσάρκου οἰκονομίας Χριστοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν, καθὼς προλέλεκται: ἦν αὐτὸς ἡμῖν ὁ ἀληθινὸς τῆς φύσεως ζωοπλάστης οικειοφάνως παραδέδωκεν.⁷⁷

Let those who enact, desire, and respect the true icon of Christ with a most honest heart, and who offer themselves to salvation, both soul and body, rejoice, exalt, and become outspoken. This icon the Celebrant Himself and God, when He assumed from us the entire composition, handed down to his initiates, at the time of his voluntary Passion, as a form of Him⁷⁸ and a most vivid remembrance. For, when He was about to offer Himself voluntarily to his ever memorable and life-giving death, taking the bread He blessed it and, after He gave thanks, He broke it, and passing it on, He said: “Take, eat, for the remission of sins; this is my body.” Similarly, passing on the cup, He said: “This is my blood; do this in remembrance of me.” He did so, because there was no other kind or form under the sun selected by Him which could depict his incarnation. Here is, therefore, the icon of his body, the giver of life, which is enacted honestly and with honour. For what else did the all-wise God want to achieve through this? Nothing else, but to show, to make abundantly evident to us men, the accomplished mystery of the dispensation in Him. That is, in the same way as that which He assumed from us is a mere matter of human substance, perfect in every respect, which, however, is not characterized as a person with a hypostasis of its own – in this way no addition of a person may occur in the Godhead – so did He command that the icon also be matter as such; that is, that the substance of bread be offered which does not yield the shape of a man’s form, so that idolatry may not be introduced indirectly. Therefore, as the natural body of Christ is holy, as it has been deified, so obviously, is the one which is in its place; that is, his icon is also holy as one which becomes deified by grace, through an act of consecration. For this is what the Lord Christ specified, as we have said; so that, in the same way that He deified the flesh which He assumed by the union of it with the sanctity of his own nature, so did He the bread of the Eucharist. He consented that this become a holy body – as a true icon of the natural flesh – consecrated by the descent of the holy Spirit and through the mediation of the priest who makes the offer in order that the bread be transferred from the state of being common to that of being holy. Thus, the physical and cogitating flesh of the Lord was anointed with divinity through the holy Spirit. Similarly also the icon of his flesh, handed

⁷⁷ Nikaia II (Mansi) 261 D–264 C.

⁷⁸ Sahas translates “in place of Himself”, for he read τόπον instead of τύπον.

down by God, the divine bread along with the cup of his life-giving blood from his side, was filled with the holy Spirit. This is, therefore, the icon that has been proven to be the true icon of the incarnate dispensation of Christ our God, as it has been stated before, and it is this one which the true Creator of the life of the world has handed down to us with his own words.⁷⁹

In the passage εἰκὼν is used seven times (one more if we include the verb εἰκονίζω) and τύπος twice in connection with the Eucharist.⁸⁰ These were the two terms also used in the *Letter* for referring to the (Baptism and) Eucharist that “are modelled and portrayed in us” (τυποῦσθαι μὲν καὶ ἐξεικονίζεσθαι ἐν ἡμῖν). But now we see the real sense of this particular “theology of the Eucharistic image”: it was conceived by the iconoclasts as an alternative explanation to the iconophile defence of icon worship. This explains the emphasis on the Eucharist as the true icon of Christ (τὴν ἀληθῆ τοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰκόνα) and the contrast with the material and blasphemous icons made by human hands. That the description of the Eucharist in iconic terms by the iconoclasts was not without consequences for the iconophiles is provided by the reading of this passage of the council of Nikaia II, which preserved it for us in the acts. The reason for this mention was undoubtedly the subsequent refutation of the ideas advanced by the iconoclasts. The deacon Epiphanius read the official doctrine of Nikaia II that reserved the word icon for images and disclaimed any use of icon for referring to the Eucharist for “none of the holy apostles ... or of our every-memorable Fathers called our bloodless sacrifice, which is celebrated in memory of the suffering of our God and of his entire dispensation, an icon of His body”.⁸¹ The patriarch Nikephoros also refuted the iconoclasts on this point and denied the existence of any biblical basis for calling the Eucharist an image: “For we call this not an image or a model of His body, although it is accomplished symbolically, but the very body of Christ deified” (ἡμεῖς γὰρ οὔτε εἰκόνα οὔτε τύπον τοῦ σώματος ἐκείνου ταῦτα λέγομεν, εἰ καὶ συμβολικῶς ἐπιτελεῖται, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸ τὸ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ θεωμένον).⁸² That the *Letter* puts emphasis on the symbolic value of the Eucharist as image of God and of Christ as image of God constitutes therefore clear proof, if not of the iconoclast sympathies of its authors, at least of a theological approach close to the imperial iconoclasm. From this perspective it is not just coincidence that the only images mentioned as such in the initial chapters of the *Letter*, up to §4, are the idols destroyed by the Church!⁸³

⁷⁹ Sahas (1986) 92–4 (with minor changes). See also the German translation of Krannich, Schubert and Sode (2002) 45–7.

⁸⁰ For the use of τύπος and εἰκὼν by iconoclasts for the Eucharist see Gero (1975).

⁸¹ Nikaia II (Mansi) 264 D–268 A, esp. 264 E.

⁸² *Antirrheticus II*, PG 100, col. 336B.

⁸³ See for example *Letter to Theophilos* 2.b: πᾶν εἰδωλικὸν καὶ δαιμονιώδες λατρείας ἄγος.

Another passage of the *Letter*, following closely the above, is perhaps worth mentioning. It appears somewhat as the corollary of the previous defence of the Incarnation of Christ as the main dogma of the Christian Church:

Τοῦ χάριν τῆς ἐν σαρκί πολιτείας αὐτοῦ τὰ θεοπρεπῆ καὶ θεοειδῆ καλλιερήματα ἀνεξάλειπτα καὶ ἀπαρεγχείρητα δέον ἡμῖν ἐμφανίζεσθαι κατὰ τὸ φάσκον προφητικὸν λόγιον, ἐγὼ ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ μου χειρὶ, λέγει Κύριος, ἐζωγράφησα τὰ τεῖχη σου, καὶ ἐνώπιόν μου ἔσῃ διὰ παντός, καὶ ἀλλαχοῦ, γράμμον αὐτὰ ἐπὶ πλακῶς καρδίας σου, καὶ ἐγκλοῖωσαι αὐτὰ ἐπὶ σῶ τραχήλῳ· καὶ ἀλλαχοῦ, ποιήσεις πάντα κατὰ τὸν τύπον τὸν δειχθέντα σοι ἐν τῇ ὄρει φησὶ Κύριος τῷ Μωσεῖ, καὶ γράψεις αὐτὰ ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκίας σου καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν θυρῶν σου, ὅπως ἔσονται ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς σου ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός.⁸⁴

The passage might be translated as follows:

Therefore, the auspicious sacrifices of His life in the flesh, which are acceptable to God and divine, must be manifested to us in an indelible way, not touched by the hand,⁸⁵ in accordance with the prophetic utterance, *I have painted your walls in my right hand*, says the Lord, *and you will be continually before me*,⁸⁶ and elsewhere, *Engrave these words upon the tablet of your heart and hang them as a chain about your neck*,⁸⁷ and elsewhere, *You shall make them all after the pattern which was shown to you on the mountain*,⁸⁸ says the Lord to Moses, and *You shall write them up on your house and on your doors so that they are before your eyes day and night*.⁸⁹

As we see, the text pleads for a manifestation of the incarnate nature of Christ “in an indelible way, not touched by the hand” (ἀνεξάλειπτα καὶ ἀπαρεγχείρητα). This might be easily understood as a rejection of human-made, perishable icons. The use of a word like ἀπαρεγχείρητα, very similar to the adjective ἀχειροποίητος used for God-given icons, may be understood as a veiled criticism of this kind of “foundational” icon. Alternatively, it could point to the acceptance of some kinds of images close to the concept of relics, for, contrary to some opinions,

⁸⁴ *Letter to Theophilus* 1.j.

⁸⁵ Munitiz et al. (1997) 9 translate the passage as follows: “We must therefore, represent the indelible and inviolable offerings of His Life in the flesh which are acceptable to God and divine.” This rendering distorts the actual meaning of the passage. First, they translate ἐμφανίζεσθαι as “represent” in the active instead of the passive “be manifested”; second, they consider the dative ἡμῖν to be the agent of ἐμφανίζεσθαι, when it is in fact its indirect object; finally, the translation makes the adjectives ἀνεξάλειπτα καὶ ἀπαρεγχείρητα appear as determinants of καλλιερήματα whereas they qualify the noun as predicatives.

⁸⁶ Is. 49.16.

⁸⁷ Prov. 3.3 and 6.21. Cfr. also Prov. 7.3.

⁸⁸ Heb. 8.5. Cfr. also Exod. 25.40.

⁸⁹ Deut. 28.66.

relics were partly accepted by iconoclasts.⁹⁰ The quotations that follow are also revealing. The first one, taken from Isaiah 49.16, refers to God, in whose hand the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem are represented. The passage speaks of a symbolic representation and it has been understood in this sense in the exegetical tradition.⁹¹ The second quotation from Proverbs 3.3 or 6.21 refers to the words (ῥήματα) or commandments (νόμιμα, νόμοι) of Solomon, so that their “engraving” on the “tablet of the heart” is also symbolic. The third quotation, taken literally from Hebrews 8.5, is in fact a quotation from Exodus 25.40 and mentions the commandment of God to Moses ordering him to make all things according to the model shown to him on the mount. The heavenly model of human action is stressed. Finally, the last quotation, from Deuteronomy 6.9, refers again to the writing of words (ῥήματα) in a symbolic way.

Finally, it would be tempting to extend our analysis to the confession of faith copied at the end of the Iviron manuscript and referred to above. In fact, mention is made there only incidentally of icon worship. Certainly, the confession mentions the seventh ecumenical synod and how it decreed to honour and revere the venerable icons. But, curiously enough, the total numbers of participants in the council are not given, although these numbers are provided for the six previous councils. Besides this reference to the council, the text just mentions in passing the iconoclasts and enemies of the icons, who do not worship the images of Christ, the Virgin and the saints. Both references could have been easily interpolated to a more general (a neutral) confession of faith.

On balance, we can conclude that in the original core of the letter the patriarchs do not refer by any means to real images of the Divinity, but continue to use (and abuse) references to symbolic images in a way that is perfectly in agreement with the iconoclast doctrine.

21.5 The Closing of the Letter

The two final paragraphs of the *Letter*, §§14–15, that Eirene Harvalia-Crook also considered as pertaining to type I, must be taken into consideration in our analysis. If her conclusions prove to be right, there would be a strong probability that these two paragraphs were integral parts of the original text of the synodical letter. Nevertheless, the general stance of the passages speaks against this supposition, for although the emperor Theophilos is addressed with respect and his reign labelled

⁹⁰ See Wortley (1982), Auzépy (2001b), Thunø (2002), James (2003) and Magdalino (2004).

⁹¹ Cyril, *Commentarius in Isaiam*, PG 70, col. 1068; Gregory of Nyssa, *De tridui inter mortem et resurrectionem domini nostri Jesu Christi spatio*, ed. E. Gebhardt (1967) 294; John Chrysostomos, *In Ioannem*, PG 59, col. 338; Didymos, *Commentarii in Psalmos*, ed. M. Gronewald (1969) 139; Prokopios Rhet., *Commentarii in Isaiam*, PG 87.2, cols 2476–2477; Theodoretos, *Commentarii in Isaiam*, ed. J.-N. Guinot (1980–1984) section 15.

as pious, the wording, as in the case of the protocol/salutatio, does not fit with the forms expected in an official document. The same word plays with names beginning in θεο- appear again here, for Theophilus' empire is labelled as θεοφρούρητον and θεοφιλεστάτην. Especially inappropriate is the closing of the *Letter* with the form ἔρρωσο θεοφιλέστατε αὐτοκράτορ, "farewell Emperor, most beloved of God".

It is against this background that we must consider the reference to an icon of the Virgin and Child we find in §14:

Διὸ πρὸς ἀπόδειξιν καὶ βεβαίωσιν τῶν παρ' ἡμῶν εὐσεβῶς δογματισθέντων εὐσεβῶν καὶ θεοπνεύστων λογίων, καὶ τὸν τίμιον καὶ σεβάσιμον χαρακτήρα τῆς παναγίας θεομήτορος καὶ θεοτόκου Μαρίας, καὶ τοῦ ἐξ αὐτῆς σαρκωθέντος καὶ νηπιάσαντος Θεοῦ Λόγου, ὡς καύχημα τῆς ἡμῶν πίστεως καὶ στέφανον κάλλους καὶ σκῆπτρον καὶ βούλλαν τοῦ ἐπουρανοῦ βασιλέως, ἐν τῷ κεφαλαίῳ τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως τοῦ ὀρθοδόξου ἡμῶν τόμου ἐνετυπώσαμεν, δευκνύντες πρὸς τὴν θεόσοφον ὑμῶν ἀγκύριον καὶ θεοδίδακτον βασιλείαν, τὸ ἔνθεον καὶ οὐρανίον καὶ ὀρθόδοξον φρόνημα πάσης ἀνατολικῆς τῶν πατριαρχικῶν καὶ ἀποστολικῶν θρόνων διοικήσεως, ἀπαραχάρακτα καὶ ἀνόθευτα ταῦτα τῶν ἐνθεαστικῶν δογμάτων τῆς ἐκκλησίας διατεθέντων, ἐπόμενοι τῷ ὄρω τῶν θεσπεσιῶν ἡμῶν πατέρων, εἰς δόξαν καὶ προσκύνησιν τῆς ἀγίας καὶ ὁμοουσίου καὶ ζωαρχικῆς Τριάδος, καὶ καύχημα τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως, καὶ ἔπαινον τῆς εὐσεβοῦς ὑμῶν βασιλείας.⁹²

The passage may be translated as follows:⁹³

Therefore as proof and confirmation of the holy and inspired tenets of faith which have been piously defined by us, we have stamped (ἐνετυπώσαμεν) at the heading of this our orthodox tomos with the orthodox confession of faith, as a mark of pride of our faith, as a crown of beauty, sceptre and seal of the King in heaven, the honoured and revered image (χαρακτήρα) of both the All-Holy Mother of God, the Theotokos Mary, and of Him, the Word of God, who took flesh from her and became an infant, thus showing to your sagacity, full of divine wisdom and divinely taught Majesty, the divine and heavenly and orthodox doctrine of the whole eastern diocese of patriarchal and apostolic sees, which have set forth inviolate and unadulterated the divinely originated tenets of the Church, whereby we followed the definition of our holy Fathers to the glory and veneration of the holy, consubstantial and life-giving Trinity, the pride of the orthodox faith, and to the praise of your pious reign.

The reference to a charaktēr (χαρακτήρ) of the holy Virgin with the Christ Child is the same as the one we found in the title of the work. Chrysostomides suggested that the writer of the title culled these details from paragraph §14.⁹⁴ Nevertheless,

⁹² *Letter to Theophilus* 14.

⁹³ Again I adopt the translation of Munitiz et al. (1997) 79 with minor changes.

⁹⁴ Chrysostomides (1997) xix.

the mention of an icon here is puzzling, not only because it appears first and lastly in a passage of Harvalia-Crook's type I, but also for two other complementary reasons. To begin with, the iconoclast emperor Theophilos is praised for his pious reign, after the patriarchs have supposedly inserted an image of the Virgin and Child in the document! This is not only a blatant contradiction but also a curious way to present the matter under debate, for if the patriarchs wanted to admonish the emperor with the presence of an icon in the heading of their synodica, they should have made more explicit their intention.

Secondly, the *χαρακτήρ* is considered "sceptre and seal of the King in heaven". These terms seem inappropriate for the image of the Virgin and Child,⁹⁵ for which we should have expected instead a reference to the incarnation of Christ and/or to the intercession of the Virgin, but not to the Heavenly King, whose representative on the earth the emperor was. It would perhaps make more sense if the image referred to was the Cross, the true sceptre and seal of God.⁹⁶ The text goes on, saying that with the *χαρακτήρ* the patriarchs succeeded in showing (*δεικνύντες*) the creed of their sees by following (*ἐπόμενοι*) the definition of the Fathers both to the glory of the Trinity and to the praise of the emperor. These final words are, from a syntactical (through the modal participles) and logical point of view, connected with the symbolic value of the attached *χαρακτήρ*, as if they expressed the aims the patriarchs pursued and the values they observed when putting the *χαρακτήρ* at the heading of the document. If this is the case, it would certainly be strange that an image of the Virgin and Child could contribute to the praise of an iconoclastic emperor. Again, there is something wrong in the message.

Thirdly, it remains to consider the exact sense we should give to this *χαρακτήρ* set at the beginning of the text. It is certainly not a seal (the text uses the word *βούλλα* in the same passage), for seals are put at the end of the documents, not at the beginning. But if we then understand *χαρακτήρ* as image (as in the translation), there arises a second problem, for it would be an image depicted on a papyrus surface, the material support used for documents issued in the patriarchal chancellery at this time.⁹⁷ However, as papyrus offers a very fragile surface and easily absorbs ink, images of this kind were not usually painted on it.

⁹⁵ Here the Slavonic version, according to the English translation by Afinogenov (forthcoming), skips the reference to the King in heaven, and mentions only the image "as a sign and inviolable and unmistakable seal". Again a proof of its derivative character.

⁹⁶ A possible parallel can be found in the following passage from John the Damascene, *Against images* 3.86, ed. Kotter (1975), taken from Leontios, *Apology against the Jews*, fr. 3, ed. Déroche (1994): "when we worship the form of the cross, we do not worship the nature of the wood, but, seeing it as seal, ring and imprint (*charaktera*) of Christ, through it we worship and greet Him who was crucified on it" (*τῷ τύπῳ τοῦ σταυροῦ προσκυνούμεντες οὐ τὴν φύσιν τοῦ ξύλου προσκυνούμεν, ἀλλὰ σφραγίδα καὶ δακτύλιον καὶ χαρακτῆρα Χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ βλέποντες δι' αὐτοῦ τὸν ἐν αὐτῷ σταυρωθέντα ἀσπαζόμεθα καὶ προσκυνούμεν*)

⁹⁷ Agati (2003) 52–3.

How to solve this contradiction? If an image of the Virgin and Child existed,⁹⁸ it was more probably drawn on parchment and therefore for a book, not a roll or a single sheet of papyrus. We could imagine it as a whole-page image set as frontispiece to the text, as in the Bible of Leo (Vat. reg. gr. 1) with the representation of the Virgin and the donor, dated to the tenth century.⁹⁹ If this were the case, we would then have a very clumsy forgery, for the text could never have passed for an original document of the patriarchal chancellery by their contemporaries. It does not matter whether the image prompted the compilation of texts, including the original letter of the patriarchs, in order to support the iconophile views of the forger, or if it was on the contrary the original letter which was interpolated and expanded, even endowed with an image of the Virgin, with the purpose of subverting its pro-iconoclastic views. The important thing is that the present text of the *Letter* probably appeared in book format with an introductory image, as a kind of theological essay, not in the form of a document.

There is another possibility, that the three patriarchs marked their synodica with a seal of the Cross, in accordance with their and the emperor's iconoclastic creed, but that the interpolator, who had already expanded the original text with stories about icon worship in order to present it as iconophile, also altered the final address to the emperor, for the iconoclast reference to the Cross did not obviously fit in with his intention. The insertion of a reference to the Virgin and Child in the middle of the passage was the easiest way to subvert the meaning of the passage. If we suppress the sequence τῆς παναγίας θεομήτορος καὶ θεοτόκου Μαρίας καὶ τοῦ ἕξ αὐτῆς σαρκωθέντος καὶ νηπιάσαντος Θεοῦ Λόγου, the rest of the passage makes perfect sense, provided we understand now *χαρακτήρα* not as an image, but as a mark or symbol, referring to the Holy Cross:

Διὸ πρὸς ἀπόδειξιν καὶ βεβαίωσιν τῶν παρ' ἡμῶν εὐσεβῶς δογματισθέντων εὐσεβῶν καὶ θεοπνεύστων λογίων, καὶ τὸν τίμιον καὶ σεβάσιμον *χαρακτήρα*, ὡς καύχημα τῆς ἡμῶν πίστεως καὶ στέφανον κάλλους καὶ σκῆπτρον καὶ βούλλαν τοῦ ἐπουρανίου βασιλέως, ἐν τῷ κεφαλαίῳ τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως τοῦ ὀρθοδόξου ἡμῶν τόμου ἐνετυπώσαμεν.

Therefore as proof and confirmation of the holy and inspired tenets of faith which have been piously defined by us, we have stamped at the heading of this our orthodox tomos with the orthodox confession of faith, as a mark of pride of our faith, as a crown of beauty, sceptre and seal of the King in heaven, the honoured and revered symbol (*χαρακτήρα*).

This explanation is obviously conjectural but gives the passage a coherence it was lacking before. It is also in accordance with the general sense of *χαρακτήρ*, which is an ambiguous term to be used instead of the more precise *εἰκὼν* favoured by the

⁹⁸ See Kalavrezou (1990) for the images of the Virgin as mother during and after the iconoclast period.

⁹⁹ For the manuscript see Mango (1969) and Dufrenne and Canart (1988). See also Walter (1997) lxxi–lxxii and Agati (2003) 312, with plate VII.

iconophiles. A possible confirmation of our conjecture is provided by the Slavonic version of the *Letter*. As we mentioned earlier, the description of the frontispiece depicting the Virgin with the Child figures there only after the colophon.¹⁰⁰

In this case, we could envisage the mark of a cross (or a group of three crosses?)¹⁰¹ either at the beginning of the text or at the top of the original document to signal the Christian faith of the signatories. Following this supposition, the final reference to the mediation of the Theotokos Mary and all the saints, which closes the *Letter to Theophilos*,¹⁰² would have been original and even inspired the interpolator to insert into the text the mention of the image of the Virgin and Child. As we know, the iconoclasts turned to the Virgin as intermediary before God. We need only to note how Theophilos, during the siege of Constantinople by Thomas, “went round all the city with the clergy, bearing the life-giving wood of the Cross and the garment of the all-pure mother of Christ our God”.¹⁰³

Be this as it may, we can conclude that there was no image of the Virgin and Child in the original *Letter* sent by the three patriarchs to Theophilos. This again raises questions about the authenticity of the two closing paragraphs of the work, although the forger could have been inspired by some previous text, as we have already suggested for the title and the protocol.

21.6 Wishing Victory on the Emperor

Sidney Griffith remarked many years ago on the pioneering use of Arabic in the Melkite Church as early as the eighth century, which runs parallel to a drastic fall in the use of Greek.¹⁰⁴ Marie-France Auzépy connected the shift from Greek to Arabic in the Melkite Church of Palestine with a cultural change that took place there at the very beginning of the ninth century and drove some of its prominent members, figures like Michael Synkellos and the brothers *Graptoi*, to a Constantinopolitan exile.¹⁰⁵ It is not a coincidence that Michael Synkellos wrote at the time a Greek syntax that became one of the most popular grammar texts of the whole Byzantine

¹⁰⁰ Afinogenov (2003–2004) 26, who unfortunately does not provide the exact wording of the passage.

¹⁰¹ See Jongkind (2005) 155 and Wilson (2008) 103 for uses of three crosses as textual marks in manuscripts of the eighth and nine centuries.

¹⁰² *Letter to Theophilos* 15: εἰρηνικωτάτη πολυετής βασιλεία καὶ γαληνικωτάτη, αἰωνίους καὶ ἀσάλευτος τροπαιοφόρῳ νίκη σὺν παντὶ τῷ ὑπηκόῳ φιλοχρίστῳ λαῷ διαμένονι αἰωνίζουσα, πρεσβείας τῆς παναγίας θεομήτορος καὶ θεοτόκου Μαρίας, καὶ πάντων τῶν ἁγίων· ἀμήν. “May your reign continue in profound peace and tranquillity, eternal and unshaken in triumphant victory together with your Christ-loving subjects, through the mediation of the All-Holy Mother of God and Theotokos Mary and all the saints, Amen.”

¹⁰³ Th. Cont. II.14 (59.11–14).

¹⁰⁴ Griffith (1988).

¹⁰⁵ Sode (2001) and Auzépy (1994) 215–16. On the formation of the ethnolinguistic identity of the Melkites see now Monferrer Sala (2012a).

period.¹⁰⁶ Accordingly, if the three Melkite patriarchs wrote a text in Greek it was probably conceived not for internal use of the Palestine Melkites, but for a Constantinopolitan audience and the iconoclastic emperor himself.¹⁰⁷

As the original synodical letter of the three patriarchs was written in Greek and addressed to the emperor, it is to be expected, as we saw, that its content was also in accordance with the iconoclastic creed of Theophilus. Indeed, the iconoclast sovereign appears to have been continuously invoked and named in the prayers of the three patriarchs, who included him in the diptychs of the Church as the orthodox emperor he undoubtedly was in their eyes. Suffice it to quote the following passage:¹⁰⁸

Λοιπὸν οὖν ἡμεῖς οἱ μέτριοι καὶ γνήσιοι θεράποντες τῆς θεοκυρώτου ὑμῶν βασιλείας, ἐξ εἰλικρινοῦς διαθέσεως καὶ δεήσεως πρὸς τὸν τῶν ὅλων Κύριον καὶ βασιλέα, ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός, εὐχαῖς καὶ ἱκετηρίαις, λιταῖς καὶ συνάξεσιν, ἱερουργίαις καὶ θείαις ἀναφοραῖς, ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς διπτύχοις, οὐ παυόμεθα τὴν ἀξιόχρεον καὶ ἀξιοπρεπῆ μνήμην καὶ ἀνάρρησιν τοῦ εὐσεβοῦς ὑμῶν θεοστηρίκτου κράτους, καὶ τῆς βασιλικῆς μεγαλαυχίας τὰ ἐγκώμια ἀνακηρύττοντες.

Well then, we the humble and true servants of your divinely sanctioned empire, out of sincere disposition and prayer to the Lord and emperor of the universe, do not cease day and night, during our prayers and supplications, litanies and services, during the eucharistic rites and divine offerings, in the reading of the sacred diptychs, to proclaim the worthy and honoured reputation and public acclamation of your devout and divinely established might, and proclaim the praises of your imperial grandeur.

It remains however to ascertain what was the original purpose of the synodical letter written by the three patriarchs. We discussed above in section 21.3 the possibility that the letter was written in connection with some kind of council summoned in Constantinople during the reign of Theophilus. The meeting of the three patriarchs in Jerusalem (provided they met there to write the letter) may have may have been convened in order that the patriarchs might compose an answer to a doctrinal question demanded by Constantinople. The writing of the *Letter* may even have originated from the inability of the patriarchs to travel to Constantinople to attend a general council.

Nevertheless, the *Letter* in its original core, that is to say its initial chapters, does not seem to deal with a disputed matter of faith, but rather to reassert the patriarchs' creed in front of the emperor. It appears even as a kind of *captatio*

¹⁰⁶ Donnet (1982).

¹⁰⁷ Theodore the Stoudite corresponded in Greek with the three Melkite patriarchs in 818: Theod. Stoud., *Letters*, Nrs 275–9 and 469. See Signes Codoñer (2014).

¹⁰⁸ *Letter to Theophilus* 3.b.

benevolentiae in front of the mighty iconoclast emperor, whose victories are mentioned twice in the text, namely in the final address (§15) and in a chapter at the beginning which is again worth quoting in full:¹⁰⁹

Τρία γὰρ δῶρα παρὰ τῷ Θεῷ ὡς ἔφη τις τῶν πατέρων, βασιλεία, προφητεία, ἱερωσύνη τοῖς ἀξίοις δεδῶρηται· καὶ γὰρ θεοστήρικτε καὶ θεογέραστε δέσποτα, χαίρομεν καὶ γεγῆθαμεν ἐν ταῖς ἀνδραγαθίαις καὶ ἀριστεταῖς τῆς ὑμῶν τροπαιούχου θεοδωρήτου νίκης. Εἰ γὰρ καὶ τόπος τυραννικῆς δυναστείας διέστησεν ἡμᾶς, ἀλλὰ τρόπος θεϊκῆς ἐξουσίας οὐκ ἔχωρισεν ἡμᾶς, ἀλλ' ὡσπερ ἀπορφανισθέντες ἐκ πατρικῆς ἡμῶν κληρονομίας καὶ ὑπόσπονδοι γεγονότες πολεμίοις βαρβάροις τετρυχωμένοι, πενθοῦντες καὶ σκυθρωπάζοντες, οὕτως πορευόμεθα ὄλην τὴν ἡμέραν, ἐλπίσι θείας καταδοκῶντες εἰς τὴν ἀρχαίαν τῆς βασιλικῆς ἡμῶν εὐδαιμονίας καὶ γαληνοτάτης ζωῆς, πάλιν ἀποκαθίστασθαι καὶ ἀποκληρώσασθαι τὰ ἀρχαῖα τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν ἐλέη τῷ νεύματι τοῦ πάντα ποιοῦντος καὶ μετασκευάζοντος καὶ ἐπιτρέποντος σκιὰν θανάτου εἰς φῶς.

For there are three gifts from God, as one of the Fathers has said, kingship, prophecy, priesthood, which are granted to the worthy. For this reason, divinely established and divinely rewarded Sire, we rejoice and take pleasure in the acts of bravery and prowess of your triumphant divinely granted victory. For even if a region under tyrannical sway has separated us, nevertheless the way of divine power has not divided us, but bereft of our ancestral inheritance and subservient to a barbarian enemy, we go about all day, emaciated, mournful and sullen, waiting with divine hope for the former state of our imperial happiness and most tranquil life to be restored once more, and to be allotted the mercies we enjoyed in the past, by command of the One who creates and changes all and transforms the shadow of death into light.

This passage directly exhorts the emperor to regain the Christian lands under Muslim rule (the alluded-to “region under tyrannical sway”) and restore “the former state of our imperial happiness”, freeing them from the “barbarian enemy”. Such a message goes far beyond the wishes customarily addressed to an emperor and there is no doubt that the patriarchs would have lost their lives if such a message had come to the attention of the caliph.¹¹⁰ The history of the Melkites at this period was one of submission to and compliance with the two major powers in the area, with patriarchs being continually deposed and exiled or even forced to act against their will. The same patriarch Job who appears as signatory of the *Letter* was forced to follow the troops of the caliph Mu‘tašim in his campaign against

¹⁰⁹ *Letter to Theophilos* 3.d. The English translation is by Chrysostomides.

¹¹⁰ As already suggested by Duchesne (1912–1913) 223–4. In the eschatocol of the Slavonic text the patriarchs even refer to “the violence of the heathens which threatens us”, according to the translation by Afinogenov (forthcoming).

Byzantium in 838 and used to persuade the inhabitants of Ankyra and Amorion to surrender to the besieging Muslims.¹¹¹

However, this does not speak against the authenticity of this appeal to the emperor, as Vasiliev thought.¹¹² As a matter of fact, after Theophilos' death and the immediate restoration of icon worship no one was interested any more in attributing to the Melkite patriarchs such a flattering address to an iconoclast emperor, described as orthodox, victorious and a future deliverer of the enslaved Christians of Syria and Palestine. The good fame of the emperor may have survived his death in popular literature or oral traditions (see Epilogue), but this provides no grounds for the forging of an official document such as our *Letter*.

Thus the address to the emperor makes sense only if it was written during his lifetime and, accordingly, must be authentic.¹¹³ The patriarchs wrote to the emperor to reassert their fidelity to the official creed of Constantinople, perhaps as an iconoclastic council was summoned at the capital, but then seem to have taken the opportunity to ask for imperial support against the Muslim rule. We do not know whether this secret written appeal to Theophilos was finally detected by the Abbasid authorities or not,¹¹⁴ but the heart of the matter is that they surely cherished hopes of an imperial reconquista for otherwise they would never have taken the dangerous step of appealing to the distant emperor in Constantinople.

¹¹¹ Eutychios, *Annals* 406–7 (see Chapters 1.3 and 17.3). One can also mention, just to compare, the case of the patriarch Elias II of Jerusalem, who was denounced, deposed and sent into exile in Baghdad while the usurper Theodore replaced him, profiting from his good relations with a Palestinian emir. For details see Leontios, *Life of Stephen the Sabaite (Greek)* §§19–23 and 44–9 and Auzépy (1999) 215–18.

¹¹² Vasiliev (1942–1944) 223: “Such outspokenness (of the patriarchs) seems unbelievable unless the *Letter* was to be kept completely secret, which is very improbable.”

¹¹³ The only alternative explanation is offered by Thümmel (2005) 257–67, who, admitting that the text was addressed to Theophilos during his reign, suggests that it was forged by contemporary iconophiles in Constantinople around 836, after the death of patriarch Antonios. According to Thümmel's hypothesis, this group of iconophiles saw then the occasion to summon a council at Constantinople for the restoration of icon worship and produced this document ad hoc in their aim to bring the emperor over to their cause. In the document, our *Letter to Theophilos*, the iconophile dogma was presented as sanctioned by an ecumenical council having met at Jerusalem at the same time. This reconstruction of the events appears highly unlikely for the emperor would never have failed to detect as a forgery a document passed by a general council of all the Melkite patriarchates and a high number of bishops and monks. It is also ingenuous to think that a dogmatic treatise could persuade an emperor to change sides in the polemic of icon worship, which was always about looking for a balance between two opposite parties with different interests.

¹¹⁴ As we have already seen, the patriarch Job, one of the three signatories of the *Letter*, was shamefully forced by the caliph Mu'taşim in 838 to persuade the inhabitants of Ankyra and Amorion to surrender to the besieging Muslims (Eutychios, *Annals* 406–7). Whether he was thus rehabilitating himself in front of the caliph for his previous treason, we will probably never know. See note 51 above for the patriarch Theodore communicating with Constantine V.

The *Life of Stephen the Sabaite*, written at the very beginning of the ninth century, contains an interesting passage that is perhaps worth mentioning here. In it the saint tries to persuade his friend Abba Christopher not to go to Baghdad in order to release the patriarch Elias (imprisoned by the caliph), for his journey would be in vain. Instead, Stephen considers it more effective “to pray for him day and night, so as to intercede (with God) for the release of the patriarch and *all Christendom*, and to protect us and them from every hostile plot and from every trial, whether human or devilish”.¹¹⁵ As we see, the hopes for a future liberation from Arab rule had not yet completely disappeared.

Considering the events from the perspective of time, we can easily see that these hopes were deceived, at least for a century, before the arrival of the Byzantine armies in Syria with the emperors Nikephoros II Phokas and John I Tzimiskes. Now, the point is how the political situation was perceived at the time. The victories the emperor Theophilos won at the beginning of the 830s along with the formation of Persian contingents in their army could have caused alarm to the Abbasid authorities in the same proportion as it raised the hopes of the Melkite community. No Byzantine source has been preserved, except for the *Letter to Theophilos* itself, where these hopes of a Christian reconquista of the Holy Land are openly expressed. But considerable information has been transmitted about the eschatological fears pervading the Abbasid ruling elite, especially during Ma'mun's reign. And some indirect reflection of this state of mind is also to be found in some contemporary Christian sources, as we will duly consider in Chapter 22.

The role the Melkite Church could have played in a Byzantine reconquista is not to be overlooked. Nehemia Levtzion has argued that although the Jacobites were more numerous in Syria than the Melkites, and also had communities in Palestine, and even despite the fact that “immediately after the Arab conquest the Greek Orthodox suffered more than the monophysite because they were deprived of the privileged status they had enjoyed under the Byzantines”, in the long run, the Orthodox population prevailed for they not only had the protection of the imperial authorities, but were strongly represented in the towns and, as rich landowners, could effectively protect the Christian peasants on the church estates.¹¹⁶ There was accordingly every reason to rely on the Melkites, especially in Palestine, for undertaking the project of a reconquista of the Middle East.

¹¹⁵ Leontios, *Life of Stephen the Sabaite* (Greek) 538 (II.21): νύκτωρ καὶ μεθήμεραν λιτανεύων αὐτόν, καὶ πρεσβεύων ὑπὲρ τῆς λυτρώσεως τοῦ πατριάρχου καὶ παντὸς τοῦ χριστονόμου λαοῦ, [καὶ ὑπὲρ τοῦ ῥυσθῆναι ἡμᾶς καὶ αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ πάσης ἐναντίας ἐπιβουλῆς] καὶ παντὸς πειρασμοῦ διαβολικοῦ τε καὶ ἀνθρωπίνου. Leontios, *Life of Stephen the Sabaite* (Arabic) §23.6, based on the Greek text, presents a lacuna in this passage and omits the sequence we marked with square brackets in the Greek text: see Lamoreaux (1999) (trans.) 28, note 134. Was it mere chance that the Arab translator let drop precisely these compromising words from his text?

¹¹⁶ Levtzion (1990) 305–6.

Assuming thus that the patriarchs contacted the emperor and urged him to reconquer the east in a written appeal, some new questions arise, most prominently, how this appeal is to be related with the synod of 836. Particularly, I think it can be ruled out that the *Letter*, in its present form, can be passed as a resolution of a massive Melkite synod. And this for a simple reason: a gathering of 1355 (!) Melkites at Jerusalem endorsing the text of a synodical letter where the Byzantine emperor is praised and his help demanded for putting an end to Arab occupation would not only have been an act of outright rebellion against the caliphate and accordingly never been permitted by Muslim authorities, but would also have been easily detected and punished.

Accordingly, be it small or big, the synod could not have produced such an open appeal to the emperor with the signature of all the participants. It appears more likely that the synod passed some neutral profession of faith like the one preserved at the end of the Iviron manuscript (except for the two short references to icon worship we considered above in section 21.2). But at the same time another text, probably not a long one, might have been composed with some secrecy by the patriarchs, this time with a direct appeal to the emperor. This text was what we have considered to be the original *Letter to Theophilos*. Certainly, the fact that it was written in Greek and, indeed, in a rhetorical way, made the bold appeal not immediately detectable to an inexperienced reader. But the problem remains that the message was conveyed by means of a written *Letter* that could have been intercepted by caliphal agents before it arrived in the capital. An oral message, rendered by the bearer of the epistle by the delivery of the text, would have been more advisable in this case to convey the appeal to the emperor. These oral messages are in fact mentioned in many Byzantine letters, for example in the epistles of Theodore Stoudites, Photios or Nikolaos Mystikos, and are also known in connection with embassies.¹¹⁷ However, in this particular case, the sparse and difficult communications between Constantinople and the Melkite patriarchates may have made it necessary for the patriarchs to compromise and produce a written record that could stand alone. Writing was in fact used to authenticate documents when the reliability of the bearers could not be easily checked, as we should assume was then the case.¹¹⁸

21.7 The Melkite Patriarchs after 843

Whereas what we know about the particular stance toward icons of the three Melkite patriarchs who appear as signatories of the *Letter* amounts almost to nothing (for, as we have argued above, the *Letter* they supposedly signed was expanded only

¹¹⁷ Drocourt (2009) 40–43.

¹¹⁸ As for the problems caused by false Melkite representatives attending councils in Constantinople in the ninth century and mainly during the patriarchates of Photios and Ignatios, see Sansterre (1973) and Signes Codoñer (2013b).

later with a dossier of texts on icon worship), two of their immediate successors appear in the sources connected with the defence of icons.

The Melkite patriarch Sergios is the addressee of a letter written by the Constantinopolitan patriarch Methodios some time after his enthronement in 843.¹¹⁹ The letter is an answer to a previous letter from Sergios, sent three years earlier, where he had agreed with Methodios on the measures to be taken for the reintegration of the iconoclast priests into the Byzantine Church. Strictly speaking, no discussion is had about icon worship, but what matters is the clear siding of the two patriarchs against iconoclasts. In a previous (lost) letter to Methodios, Sergios had apparently agreed with him that only those repentant iconoclasts who had been consecrated by the patriarchs Tarasios and Nikephoros were to be reintegrated as priests, with the express exclusion of John the Grammarian himself. However, the readmitted priests would remain “as in a second rank” (ὡς ἐν δευτέρᾳ τάξει). No priest consecrated after 815 would be kept in his post either. No wonder that Methodios acknowledges in the preserved letter that many iconoclasts did not accept the severe conditions posed for their reintegration into the Orthodox Church.¹²⁰ In any case the understanding between Methodios and Sergios on these harsh measures against iconoclasts appears to be complete.

This alignment of the Melkite patriarch of Jerusalem with his Constantinopolitan counterpart against the iconoclasts does not however mean that the Melkite sees had a continuous tradition of icon worship, and much less that we must find here a proof of the iconophile stance of his predecessors or of the *Letter to Theophilos*, written only a few years before Sergios was appointed patriarch of Jerusalem. In fact, there is some plausibility to the claim that a change of position might have taken place among the Melkite hierarchy with the arrival of Methodios.

Through a passage preserved in Eutychios of Alexandria’s *Annals* we are informed first that Sergios was appointed patriarch in 843, exactly the same year as the re-establishment of icon worship by Methodios, and then that Sergios was “the son” of the Manṣūr who had delivered the city of Damascus to the Arabs.¹²¹ Eutychios undoubtedly refers to a Manṣūr who was serving as a high official under the emperors Maurice and Herakleios and negotiated with the Muslims, on behalf of the Christians of Damascus, the surrender of the city to the Arabs. He thus assumed its rule with the approval of the new Muslim authorities. As Eutychios is our best source for this person, it is clear that he could not have said that a patriarch of the ninth century was “the son” of a person living in the first half of the seventh.¹²² It must be assumed that our author wanted only to stress that the new appointed patriarch Sergios was “of the Manṣūr (family)”, one of the leading families of Syria, to which, significantly, John of Damascus belonged.

¹¹⁹ Edited by Pitra (1868) 355–7 and reprinted in *PG* 100, 1292–1293. I dealt at some length with the text of this letter in Signes Codoñer (2013b).

¹²⁰ For a short summary of the content of the letter see Zielke (1999) 240–42.

¹²¹ Eutychios, *Annals* 408.

¹²² Eutychios, *Annals* 26.

In fact, John was called Manṣūr ibn Sarjūn, that is to say, Manṣūr son of Sergios, before he changed his name when entering the monastic state. The Damascene was indeed the grandson of the same Manṣūr to whose family the patriarch of Jerusalem belonged.¹²³ John the Damascene is presented as the “son of Mansūr” (ὁ τοῦ Μανσοῦβ) by Theophanes.¹²⁴

It is therefore clear that the new patriarch Sergios, appointed in 843, was a member of the well-known Manṣūr family, to which John the Damascene, the most famous of the Melkite iconophiles, belonged. It is also clear that the Melkite Eutychios did not regard with much sympathy the new appointed patriarch, for he connected him in a contemptuous way with the Manṣūr who had betrayed Damascus and had been anathematized for that. The harsh indictment reminds us of the anathema launched against Manṣūr’s grandson John the Damascene by the iconoclast emperor Constantine V.¹²⁵ That Sergios was appointed patriarch in 843 for his family connections is the unavoidable conclusion. But his appointment does not mean that all members of the Melkite Church in Palestine and Syria now supported icon worship. It may reveal instead a shift from iconoclasm to iconophilia in the Melkite hierarchy in accordance with the new signals sent from Constantinople after Theophilus’ death, but, as had also been frequently the case in the empire, sudden turns in the official credo of the church authorities did not alter at once the beliefs of common Melkite believers.

More or less contemporary with the appointment of a new patriarch in Jerusalem was the enthronement of Sophronios as new head of the Melkite Church in Egypt, who thus followed Christopher as patriarch in Alexandria. The *Annals* of Eutychios provide us this time with a detailed account of Sophronios’ defence of image worship before the emperor Theophilus.¹²⁶ This is in fact the only time that Eutychios refers to iconoclasm in his work. Thirty years ago Sidney Griffith submitted the text to a careful analysis that will provide the starting point for our reflections.¹²⁷ But let us first have a look at the passage itself.

Eutychios says that when Michael, “the son of Theophilus”, died, his son Theophilus became king of the Romans. “He removed the images from the churches, effaced them, broke them, and commanded that there were no images in churches at all.”¹²⁸ The cause for his iconoclasm, we are told, was that he discovered that a miraculous image of the Virgin placed in a “certain place in Byzantine territory”, from whose breast a drop of milk miraculously came out on

¹²³ See *PmbZ* #2969 and *PBE* s.v. “Ioannes 11”.

¹²⁴ Theoph. 408. Mango and Scott (1997) translated the passage as “the son of Mansour”, but the expression is to be understood again as indicating that John was a descendant of the Mansour family.

¹²⁵ Mansi (1758–1798), vol. 13, col. 356 C–D.

¹²⁶ Eutychios, *Annals* 409–11.

¹²⁷ Griffith (1982).

¹²⁸ In this and further quotations I follow the English translation of the passage by Griffith (1982) 166–7.

her feast day, was in fact manipulated by the custodian of the church in order to attract pilgrims and thus increase his revenues. Theophilos was furious at the fraud and, putting images on the same level as idols, removed them from the churches. “Thus a controversy arose among Byzantines over the matter of images.” Then the text continues:

Sophronios, the patriarch of Alexandria, heard about this, so he wrote an extensive treatise, in which he upholds bowing down to images, and he provided argumentation for it. He said, “God, praise and glory be to Him, and hallowed be His names, commanded Moses to make golden images of the Cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant, and to put it inside the sanctuary.” He also argued, “Solomon, the son of David, when he laboured to build the temple, put a golden image of the Cherubim in it.” And he said, “Whenever a document from the king arrives, sealed with the king’s seal, and the official is told, ‘This is the king’s seal, and his document’, does he not rise to take the document in his hand, to kiss it, to put it to his head and his eyes? His standing, and his kissing the document, is not to honour the scroll, or the wax that is sealed on the scroll, or the ink that is inside the scroll; nor is his standing or his honour for the document. It is certainly not for any one of these features. It is only to honour the king and the king’s name, since this is his document. So, from this perspective it is necessary for us to kiss his image, and to bow down to it, since our kissing it and our bowing down is not like our bowing down to idols. Our honour and reverence are only for the name of this martyr, whose image is here portrayed in these colors.” He dispatched the book to king Theophilos. The king received it, took delight in it, and abandoned his disapproval of images.

Abū Qurrah was also among those who supported bowing down to images. He wrote a book on this, and he named it “Sermons on Bowing Down to Images”.

The text is inserted in the reign of caliph Mutawakkil (847–861) although it refers to the appointment of Theophilos as emperor of the Romans after the death of his father Michael in 829. Apparently it is misplaced and in fact Eutybios refers to the beginning of the reign of Theophilos earlier in his work, during the caliphate of Mu‘taṣim (833–842).¹²⁹ This date is again not altogether right, for Theophilos ascended to power during the caliphate of Ma‘mūn, but it does at least make Theophilos a contemporary of Mu‘taṣim.

The most likely explanation for this second reference in the *Annals* to the ascension of Theophilos to power is that it was a kind of flashback destined to explain the origins of iconoclasm in Byzantium and thus the circumstances moving Sophronios to compose “an extensive treatise” in defence of icon worship. However, as Griffith has already remarked, Eutybios is completely confused about the sequence of Byzantine emperors from the beginning of the eighth century to

¹²⁹ Eutybios, *Annals* 407.

the reign of Theophilos, and the mention of a Theophilos, father of Michael, if not an inference of the author or his source, may lead us to suppose that he thought that there were two emperors of this name.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, the fact remains that Sophronios and Theophilos were contemporaries, provided it is true, as Eutychios tells us, that Sophronios was appointed patriarch in the “fourth year of the reign of Mu‘tašim”, that is to say, in 836, after the death of his predecessor Christopher (one of the signatories of the *Letter to Theophilos*) and when Theophilos was still in charge. Sophronios ruled for 13 years (until 848).¹³¹ Why then did Eutychios insert the piece about Sophronios’ treatise on images in the reign of Mutawakkil, that is to say, after 847, well after the death of Theophilos? The reference to Theophilos’ repentance for his previous iconoclasm may provide a clue, for, as Griffith has already remarked,¹³² it fits in too well with the official propaganda set in motion by his widow Theodora after 843 where it was said that the emperor repented for his sins on his deathbed and adhered to orthodoxy.¹³³ This might be a clear indication that the story was concocted after 843, when Theophilos was already dead.

On the contrary, if Sophronios had written his treatise before 843, this would have been not only untimely but also hard to reconcile with the common appeal to the emperor made by the three Melkite patriarchs in 836, as we argued above. A Melkite patriarch would have had no reason to challenge the imperial authorities on this matter, seeing that their support was vital to him in defending his position before the Muslim authorities and tempering their ill treatment of the Melkites. One might argue that Sophronios wrote the treatise after 838, in the wake of Theophilos’ defeat, but even then he could not have foreseen the emperor’s death and his widow’s restoration of icon worship.

The definitive solution to this question lies in the audience to which Sophronios’ treatise was addressed. This will only come with the edition of the two treatises on icon worship attributed to Sophronios which John Duffy discovered some ten years ago in Harleianus 5665, ff. 1r–47r.¹³⁴ To be sure, before John Duffy completes the edition of these texts for the *Corpus Christianorum*, nothing definitive can be said about their nature and intent. However, some facts can already be outlined.

To begin with, it is interesting that Sophronios wrote these two pieces in Greek, and not in Arabic, as Abū Qurra did. Some Greek grammatical scholia of Sophronios have been preserved, based on the commentary made by John Charax to the grammatical *Canones* of Theodosios of Alexandria (living at the beginning

¹³⁰ Griffith (1982) 168–73. For problems in oriental sources on the chronology of Theophilos’ reign see also Chapter 5.3.

¹³¹ Eutychios, *Annals* 407.

¹³² Griffith (1982) 177.

¹³³ Markopoulos (1998).

¹³⁴ Duffy (2002) with an overview of the content. I thank the author for allowing me access to his unedited paper. The text was also simultaneously discovered by Lambertz (2003) who described the manuscript and dated it to the years after 1094/5.

of the fifth century).¹³⁵ In its short prologue, Sophronios says that he wrote the scholia when he was a monk (ἡνίκα ἐμόναζε). More important, the treatise is addressed to the abbot John, bishop of Damietta (πρὸς τὸν ἀββᾶν Ἰωάννην ἐπίσκοπον Ταμιάθειας), thus confirming that the work was composed in Egypt for local audiences. Recently a Greek paraphrase of the first odes of the *Iliad*, also attributed to Sophronios, has been discovered in a Sinai manuscript, NF MG 26.¹³⁶ The discovery is revealing for two reasons. First, because it confirms that Sophronios wrote and lived in Egypt, for the manuscript dates to the ninth century and is almost contemporary with Sophronios. In fact, the text contains perhaps the oldest copy of Homer preserved. Second, Sophronios is addressed as hegoumenos, a title that implies that he was abbot of the monastery of Saint Catherine before being appointed patriarch in Alexandria. The monastic provenance of Sophronios may explain his iconophile sympathies, if it is true that monks in Egypt and especially at the Sinai monastery, were particularly prone to icon worship.¹³⁷ However, it can be doubted that writing in Greek on icon worship at this time could have been conceived only for local audiences, when Arabic was already the main language of theological discussion. Sophronios undoubtedly thought also of Constantinopolitan audiences, when he wrote his texts. Unfortunately, we cannot say for now, where did he write them (in Egypt or in the Empire?) or even whether he actually sent them to Constantinople, as the text of Eutychios expressly says.

Duffy demonstrates in his short overview of the content of the two works that Sophronios' opponents, whom the author frequently addresses, were "some iconoclast individuals or faction in his own church". As Duffy remarks, "Sophronios in Egypt, it would appear, was still confronting a live controversy that was not only disrupting the peace of the Church, but was also (as he puts it himself) providing the ἔθνικοί with an opportunity to slander Christians". This is an important point, for although Sophronios refers to the iconoclast emperors at Constantinople and therefore considers the dispute on icons against the background of Byzantine iconoclasm, it is because of internal divisions within the Egyptian Church that he took the pen. The lack of any reference or address to Theophilos, either in the title or in the content of both treatises, would confirm our previous supposition that the texts were written after the death of the emperor, as Duffy actually seems to believe, for he thinks that Sophronios wrote his works in the 840s or 850s. Moreover, in chapter 35 of the first "logos" the patriarch apparently refers to iconoclast coercion of the church as a thing of the past. In any case, the

¹³⁵ Hilgard (1894) 373–434 for the edition of Sophronios' text. Theodosios' *Εἰσαγωγικοὶ κανόνες περὶ κλίσεως ὀνομάτων καὶ ῥημάτων* are well known and have been edited by Hilgard (1889) 1–100. About him see Dickie (2007) 83–4 and Robins (1993) 111–15.

¹³⁶ Nicolopoulos (2003).

¹³⁷ See Signes Codoñer (2013c) especially 178–80 for icon worship in Egypt during the iconoclast period.

outspokenness and confidence of the author as far as the exposition of his ideas is concerned would speak for the writing of the two treatises after 843.

We provisionally conclude that Sophronios may have started, as in the case of patriarch Sergios, a change in the attitude of the Melkite church towards icons, a change that would have begun after 843 with the support of Constantinople. It took however still some time before the Melkites officially embraced the canons of Nikaia II at the time of Photios.¹³⁸

21.8 Where and by Whom was the Forgery Made?

In what appears to be a formal closing, towards the end of the Slavonic version of the *Letter* we read the following statement:

And we decided to write down this letter with the help of Basil, a loyal monk and your close slave and servant, because of his piety and because he does not fear the violence of the heathens which threatens us and because he was then in the patriarchate, going around the holy and venerated places, we tasked him with writing this in the temple of the Holy Resurrection on the place of Calvary for honour and glory.¹³⁹

Who was this Basil? Obviously Basil is a very common name, but the fact that the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, mentioned above in section 21.3, is said to have been written by Basil, nephew of the saint, may not just be a coincidence. If the Basil who wrote the *Life of Theodore* is the same who is said in the Slavonic version to have written the *Letter* in Greek, we would therefore have a serious basis for doubting the authenticity of the *Letter*, since the fantastic narrative of the conversion of the caliph to Christianity preserved in the *Life of Theodore* makes this text anything but a reliable historical source. However, the fiction in the *Life of Theodore* is accompanied, as we have just seen, with many accurate details that betray a direct knowledge of the ecclesiastical affairs in Palestine, and they could only have been written by a direct witness of the events. If the Basil who wrote the *Life of Theodore* was also the author of the *Letter*, he could have expanded an authentic document, let us say the original letter of the three Melkite patriarchs to Theophilos, to form an iconophile dossier supporting his particular views about icon worship. The exalted iconophilia of the Basil who was author of the *Life of Theodore* (writing under the regency of Theodora for Michael III) would account

¹³⁸ Signes Codoñer (2013b).

¹³⁹ This is the translation provided by Afinogenov (forthcoming). In Afinogenov (2003–2004) 26 Basil was addressed as “the faithful monk and loyal slave and servant”, without the possessive pronoun referring to Theophilos.

for this.¹⁴⁰ As we have said, this was exactly the way in which forgers worked at the time, by expanding previous texts. Significantly enough, sometimes the first person of the personal pronoun (betraying Basil's ego?) intrudes unexpectedly in the anthology section of the *Letter* as preserved in the Slavonic version.¹⁴¹

However, the Slavonic text presents Basil not as a local Melkite, but as a "close slave and servant" of Theophilos. Apparently, Basil happened to be there when the synod took place and helped the patriarchs to write the *Letter* to the emperor, perhaps because of his knowledge of Greek. It strikes one as suspicious that this indication of authorship was made in an original *Letter*, especially when we consider that the statement is lacking in the Greek versions and that there are some indications of the derivative character of the Slavonic text, as we have seen. The reference to the writing of the text by Basil would only make sense in front of Theophilos if Basil was in fact his envoy to the Melkite patriarchs, the man charged by the emperor to summon them for an iconoclast council in the capital. But if we argue for the authenticity of the passage, we must then rule out that a work written by a "close slave and servant" of the iconoclast emperor contained a dossier of texts supporting the cult of icons! This conclusion would support our previous reasoning and confirm the interpolated nature of this icon dossier, but it would at the same time question the authenticity of the work as a whole.

Now, there are other elements pointing rather to Constantinople as a place where the *Letter* could have been manipulated. In fact, that Constantinople was the place where the forgery took place or was at least initially disseminated has already been suggested.¹⁴² Ihor Ševčenko for instance made the following comment about the *Letter*:

I suspect that it was doctored up, if not composed, by some committee for the re-election of an iconodulic patriarch, based either in Constantinople or Bithynia. The letter, which claims to emanate from Jerusalem, says unlikely things about

¹⁴⁰ Binggeli (2010) 96, note 69 announces that "new evidence will be advanced in a forthcoming article by the author to support the contention that the work was composed in the two first decades of the eleventh century. Central to the argument is the *terminus post quem* provided by Nikephore Ouranos's *metaphrasis* of the *Life of Symeon Stylites the Younger*, written while he was the governor of Antioch (between 999 and 1007); it can be shown that the beginning of the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, which relates to the saint's childhood, plagiarizes Nicephore's text." Even admitting that his conclusions are correct, the possibility lies to hand that an original text of the *Life of Theodore* was expanded at the beginning of the eleventh century with episodes of the saint's childhood or other sections. This would account for the popularity of the text, which undoubtedly uses contemporary evidence of the ninth century.

¹⁴¹ Afinogenov (2003–2004) 28.

¹⁴² Griffith (1982) 177 wondered whether the text "was not composed *completely* within the Greek speaking realms of the emperor".

that city,¹⁴³ while the oriental patriarchs are remarkably well informed about goings-on in St. Sophia and even know something about its layout. The milieu which could have doctored up the letter did exist in the capital at the time.¹⁴⁴

Christopher Walter has also considered that some passages reveal a direct acquaintance with the building of Hagia Sophia, especially *Letter* 7.13 and 12.a–f, although he also admits that they too may have been later interpolations.¹⁴⁵ There are also some stories of a typical Constantinopolitan flavour, like *Letter* 11.a–e, where a certain Michael, who was to be ordained archbishop of Ephesos after a decision by the emperor Michael (“your father,” *πατρός σου*, as the text goes),¹⁴⁶ put off his consecration after a dreadful vision of the devil in Hagia Sophia, or *Letter* 7.14, dealing with an icon which was thrown into the sea at Constantinople by the patriarch Germanos and miraculously arrived at the Tiber. More recently Dimitri Afinogenov has argued for the use of Byzantine sources for the composition of the dossier of the *Letter*, including even the acts of the synod of 814 that led to the reintroduction of iconoclasm.¹⁴⁷

If we consider these Constantinopolitan elements to be an interpolation, we should conclude that the original *Letter* was manipulated and interpolated first in a Melkite land, either in Jerusalem or in Alexandria (only there could a Byzantine emperor be called βασιλεὺς (basileus) Κωνσταντινουπόλεως as in the transmitted title of the work), and then again in Constantinople. This presupposes perhaps too many changes for a text that was already widespread in the “standard” form towards the end of the ninth century, this being the date of the oldest manuscript preserved.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, if we are not pleased with the idea of supposing two successive phases in the transmission in such a short period of time, then we must resort to complementary explanations, which go well beyond the evidence but may perhaps help to understand how such a text may have been diffused.

We advanced earlier (section 21.2) that the absence of the protocol and eschatocol could be explained if we suppose that the forger used a copy of the original *Letter*, which lacked these elements and was entered either in the patriarchal or in the imperial register. Now, the secrecy of the appeal to the emperor (see section 21.6 above) makes it more likely that the forger consulted the original text of the

¹⁴³ He probably refers to the high numbers of participants in the local Jerusalemite synod.

¹⁴⁴ Ševčenko (1979–1980) 735, note 36.

¹⁴⁵ Walter (1997) lxix–lxxi. For the “holy well” quoted in 7.13 see also Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 438–9.

¹⁴⁶ This direct appellation to Theophilos is obviously a rhetorical device, much in the sense of the appellations to Julian in the treatises of Cyril of Alexandria, written many years after the emperor was dead.

¹⁴⁷ Afinogenov (forthcoming).

¹⁴⁸ Munitiz et al. (1997) xiv and xcii. Otto Kresten, on inspection of the plates of the edition, agreed with this dating.

Letter in Constantinople, where it could have been easily accessible. It is therefore possible to conceive that the interpolator of the *Letter*, being a Melkite, worked in Constantinople the whole time but with an eastern mentality. He must have been one more of the many Melkites who emigrated into Byzantine lands during the period. This would explain the twofold character of the text, the differences of linguistic level as well as its rapid diffusion among the iconophile milieu of the capital.

This would also provide an explanation for the silence of the Constantinopolitan authorities of the time about this text, whose content and purpose fit perfectly with their own policy against iconoclasm: they knew well that the interpolated *Letter* with its bulky iconophile dossier was a forgery (it was barely adapted to the uses and standards of the Melkite chancellery) and, moreover, did not reflect the real stance towards icons of the eastern Christians, with whom they corresponded. The silence of Photios in this respect is telling, especially as the oldest manuscript of the *Letter* was copied during his lifetime and contains references to the “Two-Powers” theory that the famous patriarch developed in his *Eisagoge* or *Introduction to the Law*.¹⁴⁹ If our assumption proves correct, we would have to cope again with a further episode of forgery linked with the eastern émigrés and Sabaïtes, similar to others we know.¹⁵⁰ The interpolation of older texts, which had proved so successful in the eighth century, might have continued thus in the ninth by means of other agents.

On these premises it will be objected that no conclusions about the nature of relations entertained between Theophilos and the Melkites can be obtained at all from the present text of the *Letter*. I have argued against this too sceptical approach in the preceding pages and obviously I will not repeat my arguments here. It suffices to say that no forger could have written such an enthusiastic appeal to Theophilos after 843 (see section 21.6 above) nor written a text (what we called the original core of the *Letter*) which clearly avoids any direct approach to the controversy on the icons (see section 21.4 above). Nevertheless, if the sceptical mind continues to remain unconvinced, we can at least safely conclude that the *Letter* does not prove that the Melkites opposed Theophilos in his iconoclast policy. A more balanced approach to the relations between the Byzantines and the Melkites during the reign of Theophilos is therefore conceivable.

¹⁴⁹ For Photios and the *Letter to Theophilos* see Signes Codoñer (2013b).

¹⁵⁰ See Alexakis (1996), Auzépy (2001a) and Signes Codoñer (2013b).

Chapter 22

Apocalypitics and Expectations of Political Change in the Realm of the Abbasids

In the analysis of the *Letter to Theophilos* undertaken in the previous pages I have argued that the three Melkite patriarchs, probably in 836, on the eve of Theophilos' major victory of 837, addressed a synodical letter to the emperor, where they dealt with some dogmatic questions in a way that was wholly compatible with the iconoclast doctrine, as we saw in Chapter 21.5. Moreover, they wished the emperor further victories that would eventually enable the reunification of all the Christians lands under his sway (see Chapter 21.7). This significant text was later manipulated and expanded in order to create a political manifesto in defence of icon worship, although neither the exact place where the forgery was made nor the person responsible for it can be easily ascertained (see Chapter 21.8).

We must now consider whether or not further evidence can be found for the existence of some expectations of political change amongst the Christian population of the Middle East. These expectations, linked not only with Byzantine victories but also with dissidence and internal strife in the Abbasid caliphate, could have encouraged the Melkites to address the emperor in the way they did.

Wilfred Madelung published some thirty years ago an interesting text preserved in the *Kitāb al-Ṭarā'if fī ma'rifat al-ṭawā'if* of Raḍiyy al-Dīn ibn Ṭāwūs, an Iraqi shiite scholar of the thirteenth century.¹ It is a letter written by Ma'mūn to the Abbasids and the people of Baghdad when he was already caliph but had not returned to Iraq. In the letter Ma'mūn replies to a previous insulting letter from them (now lost), which was in turn the answer to a first letter (also lost) of his written in Rabī I of HA 203 (September–October 818). In this first letter the caliph informed them of the sudden death of his appointed successor 'Alī al-Riḍā.² The reason for the harsh tone of the correspondence was undoubtedly the appointment of 'Alī al-Riḍā as heir, for he was an 'Alid and thus unwelcomed by many sunnis and supporters of the Abbasids. The authenticity of the preserved letter, a lengthy text that Ibn Ṭāwūs took from the no longer extant *Kitāb nadīm al-farīd* of the Persian philosopher and historian Miskawayh (932–1030),³ cannot be doubted, as Madelung convincingly proved, and it has been generally accepted until now.⁴ This makes the document, where Ma'mūn defends 'Alī as the most excellent

¹ For this Muslim scholar see Kohlberg (1992) esp. 57–9.

² Madelung (1981) 340–44.

³ For the use of Miskawayh by Ibn Ṭāwūs see Kohlberg (1992) 294–5.

⁴ Madelung (1981) 344–6.

companion of the Prophet, attacks the corruption of the Abbasids and, finally, justifies his designation of ‘Alī al-Riḍā as heir instead of his son ‘Abbās, one of the most revealing testimonies for the history of the period.

One passage of the letter is worth mentioning here. It is the caliph himself who is speaking:

Al-Rashīd has informed me on the authority of his ancestors and of what he found in the Book of the Reign [*Kitāb al-Dawla*] and elsewhere that after the seventh of the descendants of al-‘Abbās no pillar will remain standing for the Banū l-‘Abbās. Prosperity will continue to be fastened for them to his life. So when I take leave, take you leave from it, and when you are deprived of my person, seek for yourselves a fortified refuge. But alas, there will be nothing for you but the sword. The Ḥasanī, the avenger and destroyer, will come to you and mow you down, and the Sufyānī, the subduer. But your blood will be spared at the advent of the Qā’im, the Mahdī, except for just claim.

As for my intent in respect to the pledge of allegiance for ‘Alī ibn Mūsā [al-Riḍā], peace be on him, in addition to his meriting it in himself and my choice of him as the best, it was only that I might become the sparer of your blood and your protector by perpetuating the love between us and them. This is the way I pursue in honouring the kindred of Abū Ṭālib in giving them a share of the *ḥay’* in the small amount that accrues to them, even though you claim that I desire its income and its benefits should pass to them. Thus I am occupied with managing your affairs and with taking care of you and your offspring and sons after you, while you occupy yourselves with carefree amusement. You stray in a flood, not knowing what is intended for you, and the affliction and robbery of your wealth which are approaching.⁵

As we see, Ma’mūn announces to his partisan Abbasids that he appointed Riḍā as successor instead of a member of the Abbasid house because he knew from his father Hārūn al-Rashīd that the Abbasid caliphate was to come to an end after the seventh caliph, who was Ma’mūn himself. There will follow an age of tribulations, represented by the apocalyptic figures of the Ḥasanī⁶ and the Sufyānī,⁷ with the final coming of the Mahdī, who will restore faith to its original form and eradicate moral corruption.

⁵ Madelung (1981) 343.

⁶ The Ḥasanī is a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad’s elder grandson Ḥasan (625–669), considered an imām in the shiite tradition. However, according to Cook (2002) 64–5, the apocalyptic figure of the Ḥasanī was also adopted by sunnites, as they considered that Ḥasan’s willingness to give up the caliphate to Mu’āwiya in 661 signified an unworldly lack of political ambition. Bayhom-Daou (2008) 22–3 considers the anomalous characterization of the Ḥasanī as avenger and destroyer.

⁷ The Sufyānī represents the descendants of the Umayyads. For him see Madelung (2004) and further below.

If this passage were authentic, then we would have a caliph openly raising the question of the continuity of his own family power, an unprecedented fact that could not but trigger political instability in the caliphate – and encourage of course Christians' hopes for a political change. However, this passage in particular (but not the rest of the letter) has been recently suspected of being an interpolation.⁸ As a matter of fact, it seems strange that Ma'mūn appointed Riḏā as successor just because of an apocalyptic prophecy. He must have paid attention to other factors and actually many interpretations to the designation of Riḏā have been advanced in recent research.⁹ But, although the passage could have been interpolated, this does not change anything about the proliferation of prophecies predicting the end of Abbasid rule precisely during the reign of Ma'mūn. Hayrettin Yücesoy has devoted a comprehensive monograph to these messianic beliefs in the early ninth century, where the reader can find useful information.¹⁰ Therefore we will content ourselves here with a brief overview.

Clear evidence of the apocalyptic fever that shook the caliphate at the beginning of the ninth century is provided by the *Kitāb al-Fitan* (*Book of Apocalyptic Turmoil*) of Nu'aym ibn Ḥammād. Nu'aym was a contemporary of Ma'mūn and died in 843 after being put in jail by caliph Wāthiq for refusing to acknowledge that the Qur'ān was created. In his *Kitāb al-Fitan* he compiled about two thousand prophecies, condensed into 10 chapters, covering the period from early Islamic times up to the third Islamic century.¹¹ The reason for this "apocalyptic turmoil" is to be found in the first place in the long period of civil war following the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd in 809 and coming to an end only with the entry of Ma'mūn into Baghdad 819. Between these two dates fell the year 200 HA, corresponding to 11 August 815 to 29 July 816. It comes as no surprise that different prophecies appearing at the

⁸ Bayhom-Daou (2008) considers that it was Ibn Ṭāwūs himself who made the interpolation. However, Kohlberg (1992) 86–7 considers that the author "is scrupulously honest about his sources" and that he always "makes clear when the material was composed by him and where he is citing from earlier sources". It is therefore to be considered whether the interpolation was made before the text reached Ibn Ṭāwūs, as Yücesoy (2009) 93 suggests, referring to his own unpublished doctoral dissertation, "The Seventh of the 'Abbāsids and the Millenium: A Study of the Fourth Civil War and the Reign of al- Ma'mūn (193–218 A.H. / 808–833 C.E.)", Chicago 2002, 197 ff.

⁹ Yücesoy (2009) 91–2 for a panoramic view of the different explanations proposed, with bibliographical references.

¹⁰ Yücesoy (2009).

¹¹ See Yücesoy (2009) 11–13 for a short assessment of the work. Unfortunately the most comprehensive study of the work, made by Jorge Aguadé, "Messianismus zur Zeit der frühen 'Abbāsiden: Das Kitāb al-Fitan des Nu'aym ibn Ḥammād", is an unpublished PhD diss. from the University of Tübingen submitted in 1979. There is no modern translation of the Arabic text, which has been recently published by Shuhayl Zakkār in Beirut in 1993. Also lacking is a thoroughgoing study of the references to Byzantium and the Arab Christians in the Abbasid apocalyptic material of the time of Ma'mūn, which could parallel the one made by Bashear (1991) on the basis of Nu'aym for the Umayyad period.

time made the beginning of the third Islamic century coincide with the end of the seventh millennium and thus gave the year an apocalyptic relevance.¹²

Most significant for us, these Islamic apocalypses found an echo among Christians, who developed during the same period other apocalypses predicting the end of Abbasid rule.¹³ The most important of them is the so-called *Legend of Sergios Baḥīrā* which Barbara Roggema has recently subjected to a comprehensive study, which includes an edition with translation of the different versions preserved in Syriac and Arabic.¹⁴ The *Legend*, as it is known, describes the encounter of the prophet Muḥammad with a Christian monk, called Sergios (by the Syriacs) and Baḥīrā (by the Arabs). According to the Syriac tradition, this monk informed Muḥammad of the doctrines of Christ, which were later misrepresented by the prophet of Islam. The variant versions of the *Legend* that have been preserved (West Syrian, East Syrian, Arabic) contain two apocalypses, one before the encounter of the monk with the prophet and one after. In them, as is usual in this genre of predictions, the end of Muslim rule is announced.

Curiously enough, as convincingly argued by Roggema, this end is connected again with the reign of the seventh son of Hāshim, that is to say the seventh Abbasid caliph, Ma'mūn, for Abbasids referred to themselves as “sons of Hāshim” in order to emphasize their descent from Hāshim ibn ‘Abd Manāf, the common ancestor of Muḥammad, the ‘Alids and the Abbasids. The “sons of Hāshim” are further identified in the prophecy with the color black, undoubtedly an allusion to the black banner of the Abbasids. The text also refers to a period of civil strife that will begin with the reign of the seventh Hāshimite: an unmistakable allusion to the civil wars of 809–819.¹⁵ After the end of the Hāshimites, it is said that the Mahdī will come and “will uproot the fortified city of Babel and destroy its stronghold and pull down its walls”.¹⁶ This is now clearly a reference to the siege of Baghdad in 812–813 at the climax of the civil war between Amīn and Ma'mūn, during which many buildings were in fact demolished. The hopes of the appearance of a Mahdī are linked to the usurpation of Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī in 817–819 after the proclamation of the ‘alid imām Riḍā as heir to the caliphate.¹⁷ There is accordingly no doubt that the apocalypse of Sergios Baḥīrā was composed during the reign of Ma'mūn.¹⁸

¹² Yücesoy (2009) 50–58. See also Kennedy and Pingree (1971) 112–13.

¹³ See for instance the Arabic version of a Sibylline Prophecy edited by Ebied and Young (1977), wherein the eighth sun the destruction of the churches in Syria and the devastation of Jerusalem is announced following the civil war of Amīn and Ma'mūn and then, in the ninth sun, the “Lion Cub” (the Roman Empire) will appear from the west and “rebuild the earth’s ruins, and the world shall be prosperous, and the fruit of the earth shall multiply”.

¹⁴ Roggema (2009).

¹⁵ Roggema (2009) 69–71.

¹⁶ *Legend of Sergios Baḥīrā* {17.64}, trans. Roggema (2009) 291, 361, 503.

¹⁷ Roggema (2009) 71–2, 87–9.

¹⁸ Roggema (2009) 86–7, with reference to previous datings of the text in note 102.

However, the restoration of the Roman Empire, which would follow the end of the Abbasid rule and lead the Ishmaelites back to their southern lands,¹⁹ is not presented in the prophecies of Sergios Baḥīrā as coming immediately after the Mahdī, for after him and before the final Byzantine reconquista, other allegorical figures appear, such as the “sons of Sufyān”, the “sons of Joktan”, a second Mahdī and the Green king.²⁰ These intermediary stages between the Christian restoration and the end of the Abbasid power show that in the mind of the composer of the apocalypse Islam will not disappear in the immediate future, but towards the end of the world.²¹ Evidently, the author of the prophecies did not envisage an immediate political change, perhaps because he did not even imagine that the Byzantine emperor could in fact appear again in Syria and Palestine, as did the armies of Nikephoros II and John I Tzimiszes in the tenth century. But the fact remains that at the beginning of the ninth century, the focus of the Christian writers living under the Abbasids shifted from the reasoned defence of the Christian faith and the refutation of the religious doctrines of Islam that had prevailed in the eighth century back to an apocalyptic approach that was the result of the political turmoil shaking the Abbasid caliphate after the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd.²² Under these conditions, any military campaign or diplomatic approach by the Byzantines would have been highly welcome.

This climate would provide a complementary explanation for the writing of such a eulogistic text as the *Letter to Theophilos*. But the definitive proof that these “apocalyptic expectations” played a role in the political dealings of the period is provided by the Byzantine emperor himself. In the letter that the Umayyad emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān wrote to Theophilos after the defeat at Amorion in 838, to which we referred in Chapter 18.2, the Arab briefly summarizes the content of the previous letter sent by Theophilos. Among other things, we are told that the emperor expected an impending end to the Abbasid caliphate. The emir’s words are:

Then, [we understood] what you mentioned about the deeds of the two villains, the deeds of Ibn Marājil [Ma’ mūn] and Ibn Mārīda [Mu‘taṣim]²³ his brother and successor after him, of the heresy in their creed, of the vice in their behaviour, of their sins against their subjects and the calamities resulting from the violence against them, and how they permitted that their blood was shed and their goods taken; and how you mentioned that the moment for the end of their dynasty [the Abbasids] has come, that the continuity of their power will cease and Allah will concede the restoration of our dynasty and the power of our fathers that is proclaimed by the books, declared by the prophets, conferred by the consensus

¹⁹ *Legend of Sergios Baḥīrā* (17.95–101), trans. Roggema (2009) 295, 367–9, 415, 507.

²⁰ Roggema (2009) 72–86.

²¹ Roggema (2009) 90–92.

²² Roggema (2009) 62. The Christian Kindī, writing again during the reign of Ma’ mūn, refers also expressly to an imminent end of the world in his apology; see Bottini (1997) 215.

²³ Both caliphs are referred to by the names of their mothers, in an insulting way.

[of the doctors] and conceded by argument; and that you engaged us to make an expedition against them to obtain revenge on them and that you promised your help to us with the help one friend provides to his friend, whose love and affection towards him he knows.²⁴

In a later passage of the letter, the emir repeats these same points, although in a cursory way in order to give an appropriate answer to the proposal of Theophilos. ‘Abd al-Rahmān then expresses his wish that the announced end of the Abbasids should come to be true with the support of Allah and that His promises would be fulfilled. He further says that he hears “constantly” that the Umayyads would be avenged on the Abbasids, who will be punished by Allah with the extinction of their lineage.²⁵

The passage is interesting for many reasons, such as the reference to the Abbasid “heresy”, meaning undoubtedly the Mu‘tazila movement fostered by Ma‘mūn. But the most important point for us now is that both sender and addressee, the Byzantine emperor and the Umayyad emir, accept the existence of widespread prophecies announcing the end of the caliphate. These prophecies seem to gain momentum due to the internal conflicts shaking the caliphate, which were minutely described by Theophilos in his letter to the Umayyad emir. In other words, there was an atmosphere of instability in the air that very soon proved false, but caused a revival of old apocalyptic prophecies in which the Umayyads played an important role.

The apocalyptic figure of the Sufyānī, mentioned in the (probably interpolated) passage of the letter of Ma‘mūn we saw above, was a key figure in this revival. He derives his name from the Umayyad Abū Sufyān, father of the caliph Mu‘āwiyya, first caliph of the Sufyānī branch of the Umayyads who reigned between 661 and 684, until he was replaced by the Marwanid Umayyads. Modern research discusses the emergence of an apocalyptic tradition in the eighth century linked with the name of the Sufyānī, and whether it arose originally out of the popular hopes among the Syrians for a restorer of the Sufyānī branch of the Umayyad house or, on the contrary, whether Sufyānī was conceived from the very beginning as a rival to the saviour Mahdī and therefore as an Antichrist figure, as he appears in the later Abbasid and Shiite traditions.²⁶ Be this as it may, what matters for us now is that there were in the beginning of the ninth century some partisans of the Umayyads who proclaimed themselves caliphs in Syria. The best known of them is Abū al-‘Amayṭar the Sufyānī, who was raised to the caliphate in September 811 in Syria and held Damascus against the Abbasids for at least one year, until he was deposed

²⁴ For the text see Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, 180v–181r and Lévi-Provençal (1937) 17–18. The translation of Makki and Corriente (2001) 296 is to be followed in preference to the verbose version of Lévi-Provençal (1937) 21. I checked my own translation against the Arabic original.

²⁵ Ibn Ḥayyān, *Muqtabis*, 181r and Lévi-Provençal (1937) 19, trans. Makki and Corriente (2001) 297 and Lévi-Provençal (1937) 22.

²⁶ Madelung (2004).

in 812–813.²⁷ This proves that expectations of a restoration of the Umayyads, as referred to by Theophilos in his letter to the Andalusian emir, were not anachronistic.

The episode regarding the conspiracy of ‘Abbās undoubtedly contributed to raising expectations of a significant change in the relations between Muslims and Christians. Obviously, there were many factors which contributed to the conspiracy of Ma’mūn’s son, including the influence of the commercial sector among the Abbasid ruling classes. We duly considered this in Chapter 18.1. Because ‘Abbās had led many campaigns against Byzantium in the company of his father Ma’mūn and was even responsible for the military frontier lands of the Thugūr, the echo of the treaty he agreed with Theophilos, preserved by Michael the Syrian, may have had a great impact on the population of the Middle East.²⁸ It is no coincidence, as Michael the Syrian reports, that ‘Abbās’ secretary, a Nestorian, was accused of conspiracy along with his master, who had been earlier the dearest friend of Manuel the Armenian, as we saw in Chapter 5.4. We further know that ‘Abbās’ name and memory were publicly accursed by the caliph, but although this can always be connected with his conspiracy, the extent of his *damnatio memoriae* contrasts with the attitude Ma’mūn had, for example, towards his uncle Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī, brother of Hārūn al-Rashīd, who was proclaimed caliph in July 817, thus defying Ma’mūn’s authority and committing high treason against him. Ibrāhīm held power in Baghdad for almost two years, a period that ended only with the entry of his nephew into Baghdad in August 819. Ibrāhīm then went into hiding for several years, but although he was discovered and imprisoned by Ma’mūn, he was soon released and accompanied the caliph as courtier and poet in the following years.²⁹ Obviously Mu’taṣim was not Ma’mūn, but the ferocity with which he dealt with the conspirators in 838, minutely described in Arab sources, reveals perhaps that the conflict had deep roots that could not be healed by recourse to clemency.

All in all, these episodes of political turbulence in the caliphate may well have inspired those Greek texts of the period in which the conversion of the Arabs or the caliph to Christianity figures prominently. First and foremost, we should mention the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, in which the caliph of Baghdad converts to Christianity. This conversion is referred to in the final part of the *Life*, where the protagonist, Theodore bishop of Edessa, travels to “Babylon” in an effort to plead his case before the “emperor” against the “Manicheans” of his see, who were plotting against Theodore’s life and making permanent trouble (§69). Theodore’s stay in Baghdad takes however an unexpected turn after he heals the caliph of an eye disease, something at which the personal physicians of the caliph had previously failed (§71–2). The grateful caliph then gives orders to his emirs to restore orthodoxy in Edessa and neighbouring regions by expelling and punishing the dissidents according to Theodore’s wishes (§§73–5). After that, the bishop

²⁷ For him and other usurpers in the name of the Sufyānī see Madelung (2000).

²⁸ Mich. Syr. 538, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 101.

²⁹ For the hiding of Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī in 819, his imprisonment in 826 and the pardon of the caliph see Ṭabarī III.1034–5, 1074–5, trans. Bosworth (1987) 90–92, 146–7.

pays a visit in his cave near Baghdad to the eremite John, for he carried a letter of the Edessan stylite Theodosios, John's brother, for him. Astonishingly the eremite knew beforehand of the visit and his brother's letter, and even achieves a miracle, for Theodore, to his wonder, appears to carry not just the letter of Theodosios but already the answer of his brother John to him, in which the eremite prophesies the imminent conversion of the caliph to Christianity. This had also been predicted by Theodosios himself to Theodore before the latter set off from Edessa to Baghdad (§§76–7). Back at the court, Theodore remains closely attached to the caliph and through skilful indoctrination succeeds in making him embrace the Christian faith and abjure Islam (§§78–81). What comes next is the secret baptism of the caliph in the margins of the Tigris through the agency of bishop Theodore. He receives in the ceremony the Christian name of John. Witnesses of this "historical" event are the three servants of the caliph (said to be of Alan descent) and the narrator, Theodore's nephew Basil, who until this point has regularly stressed his presence at all the previous episodes (§82). After that Theodore continues with the indoctrination of the caliph (§83) and travels to Constantinople to obtain a piece of the Holy Cross from the emperor Michael III for the converted caliph. The bishop again effects a healing, this time of a leucoma affecting the empress Theodora (§§84–5). This serves to date the event to the years 843–856. In the following chapters Theodore, after bringing the piece of the Holy Cross to Baghdad, holds a religious debate at court in front of a Jew (who then converts to the Christian faith) and arranges a lengthy interview of the caliph "John" with his namesake the eremite (§§86–102). After that Theodore leaves Baghdad with Basil and reaches Edessa, passing through Jerusalem (§§103–5). At his point the caliph "John" decides to make a public statement of his Christian faith in front of all the assembled people of Baghdad. This obviously triggers a violent reaction of the mob, which slaughters him on the spot on 30 May, making of him a martyr (§§106–11). Theodore and Basil are informed of what happened by a deacon coming from Baghdad. The eremite and his brother the stylite die, one soon after the other, then Theodore three years later, at the Sabas monastery in Palestine, leaving only Basil as a witness of his life and miraculous deeds (§112–15).

Needless to say, the *Life of Theodore of Edessa* has no historical basis at all, for no caliph was converted to Christianity, even less slaughtered in Baghdad by a furious mob because of his public confession.³⁰ However, it is interesting to note that whereas the Greek version of the *Life* consistently reports the name of the caliph as Μαυίας, meaning Mu'āwīya (and thus the Umayyads), the Arab version, probably derived from the Greek,³¹ identifies him as the Abbasid Ma'mūn.³²

³⁰ Vasiliev (1942–1944) tried to identify the caliph of the *Life* with Mu'wayad, killed in 866 for sedition by his brother the caliph Mu'tazz. His interpretation, as rightly indicated by Griffith (2001b) 156–8, is based on a too literal acceptance of the text and does not tally well with other historical accounts.

³¹ Griffith (2001b) 153.

³² Griffith (2001b) 150, note 22.

Obviously the philhellenic Ma'mūn (if not his son 'Abbās) was an ideal candidate for the post of heterodox caliph, although this does not mean in any way that he approached Christians for more than their intellectual contribution to the study of Greek texts.³³ The reference to the Umayyad patronymic in the Greek version seems therefore more appropriate, not just because of its vagueness, but also considering a possible connection with the Sufyānī. In any case this reference, as well as the connection with the regency of Theodora (842–856), makes it evident that the author of the text was setting the action in the first half of the ninth century, either in the reign of Theophilos or shortly after. Accordingly, some distance between his readers and the narrated facts was needed in order to make the story more palatable to them.

This distance may of course be temporal, thus pointing to the writing of the *Life* at a later stage, not earlier perhaps than the last third of the ninth century. Or even later, for after the taking of Antioch in 969 new hopes of a Byzantine reconquest of the east were raised amongst the Melkites, who could even have dreamed of a conversion of the caliph to Christianity, for which our text offered a “historical” precedent. In fact, Armand Abel thought that the *Life* was written in the tenth century for propaganda purposes to go along with the Byzantine reconquest of northern Syria.³⁴ Sidney Griffith has also considered this dating likely.³⁵ Furthermore, André Binggeli has recently announced that in a forthcoming study he will provide new evidence supporting a dating of the *Life* to the two first decades of the eleventh century. Central to his argumentation will be the fact that the beginning of the *Life of Theodore of Edessa* is based on Nikephoros Ouranos' paraphrasis of the *Life of Symeon Stylites the Younger*, written between 999 and 1007.³⁶

All this evidence, however, does not preclude that a shorter version of the *Life of Theodore* existed before the present one. In fact many plots come together in our version of the *Life*, which for instance includes the story of the martyrdom of Michael the Sabaïte in the reign of 'Abd al-Mālik (685–705, that is, 100 years before Ma'mūn).³⁷ It appears thus that the final part of this composite *Life of Theodore*, the conversion of the caliph to the Christian faith, may have had an autonomous existence before it merged into the present version. Griffith has already suggested

³³ For the atmosphere of debate during his caliphate see Griffith (1999), (2001a) and Gutas (1998) 75–104. See also Chapters 23–24.

³⁴ Abel (1949).

³⁵ Griffith (2001b) 154–5.

³⁶ Binggeli (2010) 96, note 69.

³⁷ Peeters (1930). The caliph is called Ἀδραμέλεχ in the *Life* §24. The name seems to be used in the biblical sense as a substitute for the real one of the caliph. I am therefore not sure that the writer had the reign of 'Abd al-Mālik in mind when he used it. For the striking parallels of the *Life of Theodore of Edessa* with the *Barlaam and Ioasaph* see Kazhdan (1988) and Volk (2003) 161–8, as well as Signes Codoñer (2006) 104–5. Also revealing are the similarities of the *Life of John of Edessa* to our text, as it concerns mainly the discussion with the Jew at the court and the conversion of the caliph. For this see Lamoreaux and Khairallah (2000) and further below in this section.

that the author of the text, the monk Basil of Saint Sabas who speaks in the first person at many points of the narrative, was living at the beginning of the ninth century and may have had personal contact with Theodore Abū Qurra. Basil could even have modelled the *Life of Theodore* on the biography of Abū Qurra himself.³⁸ In fact, the historical debate held between Abū Qurrah and caliph Ma'mūn at Ḥarrān in 829³⁹ provides a good pattern for the similar discussion between Theodore and “Mauias” that takes place in the original Greek *Life*, thus facilitating the identification of the caliph with Ma'mūn in later Arab versions.⁴⁰ Accordingly, it appears as a possibility that the original core of the present Greek *Life* was based loosely on facts dating back to the beginning of the ninth century, Abū Qurrah's own time. Whether the inspiration came from a previous source or through oral reports cannot be established with any certainty, but what matters here is that the author of the *Life of Theodore*, whoever he was and whenever he wrote, did not freely invent the scenario for his “hagiographic novel”, but probably profited from previous records. To put distance between the facts and the readers, the author could have been helped by the physical, not just the temporal, remoteness, if we assume that the present *Life* was composed in Constantinople by a Melkite emigrant who was thinking mainly of an imperial readership.⁴¹ This would permit a dating of the writing of the present *Life* closer to the events it supposedly described.

There is a further point favouring the idea that the story of the conversion of the caliph to Christianity had already arisen in the ninth century. Certainly, the Melkite hopes of a Byzantine reconquest materialized first in the tenth century, but at this time the idea of converting the caliph to the Christian faith was surely unthinkable, mainly as a result of the slow but steady conversion of thousands of Melkites to Islam during the previous two centuries. There was no way back in this process, whereby by the middle of the tenth century the vast majority of the population was already Muslim. This is the opposite situation to the one we find at the beginning of the ninth century, when Christians remained the main community in the Middle East. Only at this time was it conceivable that the conversion of a caliph could eventually reverse the surge of Islamization and bring back the times of Christian supremacy.⁴² The hopes of unification of the Christian lands expressed in the *Letter of the Three Patriarchs*, as we already saw in Chapter 21.7, tally perfectly with these

³⁸ Griffith (2001b) 153–4.

³⁹ Dick (1999). See also Dick (1990–1991).

⁴⁰ Griffith (2001b) 155–8.

⁴¹ Griffith (1986) 133 and (2001b) 154, Signes Codoñer (2006) 100–101. For possible connections with the “Basil” who figures as author of the *Letter to Theophilos* see Chapter 21.8.

⁴² For the steady rhythm of conversions to Islam during the first Abbasid age see Dennet (1950) and Bulliet (1979), especially the chapters devoted to Iraq (pp. 80–91) and Syria (pp. 104–13), where the Muslims made up 50 percent of the population by the third quarter of the ninth century. See also Morony (1990) and, for the conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine, Levtzion (1990).

expectations, which the above-mentioned apocalyptic prophecies made even more forceful. Not coincidentally, the clear disgust expressed by a Christian polemicist like Kindī in front of the increasing mass of converts to Islam appears in his work side by side with the apocalyptic expectations of a sudden end of Abbasid power.⁴³

In fact, there are other stories speaking of conversions of Muslim leaders to Christianity dating from the beginning of the ninth century. Perhaps the most conspicuous is the *Life of John of Edessa*, written c. 900 (if not earlier) according to its editors Lamoreaux and Khairallah.⁴⁴ In the *Life*, of which Arabic and Georgian versions survive, the protagonist, bishop John of the Edessa (perhaps the same John who appears as addressee of Abū Qurra's treatise *On the veneration of the holy icons*), after winning a debate with a Jew on matters of faith in front of Ḥārūn al-Rashīd (786–809), succeeds in raising the caliph's daughter from the dead after she has been in the grave for no less than 47 days. Impressed by this miracle,

[the caliph] commanded excursions into the land of the Romans cease and that the customs and festivals of Christianity be practiced openly. He also lifted oppression from the people in general. Indeed, if it had not been that his co-religionist would have hated to hear it, he would have entered the Christian faith. He also ordered that churches be built throughout his dominion and that Abba John be given everything he wanted.⁴⁵

As we see, Ḥārūn al-Rashīd was also on the brink of converting to Christianity! It almost appears as if this story had provided the inspiration for the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, whose protagonist comes from the same Syrian city. But these are not the only texts where Muslim lords are won over to Christianity. In the final part of the *Dialogue of Abraham of Tiberias* (Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī) with 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī (dated 820) some Muslims convert to Christianity after hearing the arguments of the protagonist. Not surprisingly, they are immediately beheaded by the emir.⁴⁶ Rawḥ, a noble Qurayshī nephew of the caliph Ḥārūn al-Rashīd, was also martyred at this time by his uncle the caliph after being baptized in the Jordan with the name of Antonios.⁴⁷ In this case, unlike the others, there is some evidence supporting a historical core for the episode.⁴⁸

⁴³ Kindī establishes a typology of converts to Islam, who according to him come from amongst uncivilized Arabs, heretics, idolaters, Jews, Mazdeans, traitors, criminals and social climbers; see Bottini (1997) 177–81. For his apocalyptic expectations see *ibid.* 215.

⁴⁴ Lamoreaux and Khairallah (2000).

⁴⁵ Lamoreaux and Khairallah (2000) 460.

⁴⁶ Marcuzzo (1986) §§ 566–84.

⁴⁷ There are different versions of this apparently popular Arabic *passio*. For them see Peeters (1912), (1914), Dick (1961), Pirone (1999) and Monferrer Sala (2008). There is a short appraisal of the *passio* in Vila (2009). See also Binggeli (2010) for the religious significance of Rawḥ's conversion to Islam.

⁴⁸ See also Signes Codoñer (2013c) 167–9.

Certainly the *Life of Theodore* went beyond other histories of conversion in that it made of the caliph a pious Christian. But, we are here a long way away from the fantastic and wonderful vision of the east rendered in the *Life of Makarios Romanos*. There, the three monk protagonists, setting off from a Mesopotamian monastery, travel to far eastern regions finding all kind of fabulous beasts (such as kynokephaloi, unicorns, onokentauroi and dragons, among others) and magic places before they meet the cave of the holy Makarios. Here, the novel has definitely sacrificed the historical kernel for the entertainment of the readers. Accordingly, the account of the conversion of the caliph as rendered in *Life of Theodore* follows a middle way between historical and fictional hagiographic narratives of the period and must be approached with utmost care. Nevertheless, it can be considered in a certain sense an historical source in so far as it reflects the wishes and hopes of the Melkite community in the first half of the ninth century, a period of turmoil and change where even the conversion of a caliph to Christianity seemed conceivable. It is against this background that the projects and campaigns of Theophilos in the east must be set.

SECTION VII

Cultural Exchange with the Arabs

Byzantium and the Islamic world were destined to undergo cultural exchanges from the very beginning of their coexistence in the seventh century, when the Arabs conquered the Byzantine lands of the Middle East and Egypt. The continuous presence in the lands of the caliph of Christians, bearers of a strong and long Greek cultural tradition, was undoubtedly a main factor in connecting the two cultural areas of orthodoxy and Islam beyond their political borders, but also meant that the cultural assimilation tended to run eastwards from the Greeks to the caliphate at first.¹

At the same time war between these two major powers never ceased during the period, for it was the natural way to attain ideological supremacy. However, empires had to win their supremacy not only on the battlefield but also through the prestige of their religion, cultural lore and political structures. They could not ignore what happened beyond their borders without running the risk of being overcome by emergent ideologies mightier than armies, whose rise they had not been able to foresee in due time. This lack first of foresight and then of reaction to the ascent of Islam – along with the obvious failure of resources and great loss of territory – was one of the causes of the major crisis affecting Byzantium's identity after the first half of the seventh century in the face of the Arab invasion.

The ninth century represented a turning point in the attitude of Byzantium towards the east and the reign of Theophilos is a main link in the chain of events that determined this process.² In this final section of the book we will briefly comment on the character of this cultural exchange, mainly on the basis of previous research.

¹ For a panoramic of the Christians living in the caliphate see Griffith (2008b).

² See for instance Walker (2012) 20–21: “The culmination of Iconoclast-era emulation of Islamic models can be located in the second quarter of the ninth century during the reign of Theophilos.”

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Chapter 23

Some Preliminary Matters

The existence of cultural exchanges between orthodoxy and Islam being undeniable, their exact nature needs to be checked. We must obviously proceed in two directions, considering both the Byzantine influence on the caliphate and the opposite influence of the Arabs on Byzantium.

Modern research on the impact of Greek literary and scientific tradition upon the caliphate, especially at the time of the Abbasids, has left out Byzantium, for it has considered as actors in the process mostly the (predominantly Syrian) Christians resident in Arab lands. Abbasid philhellenism, as masterfully studied by Dimitri Gutas in a book that is already a classic, has no word for Byzantium.¹ This version of the events is as old as the Abbasid propaganda that always stressed the cultural backwardness of the Byzantines, who were no longer bearers of the old and prestigious Greek culture. Suffice it here to quote a famous passage of the Arabic intellectual Jāhīz (c. 776–869), a contemporary of Ma'mūn and Theophilos:

If the Musulmans knew that the Christians, and in particular the Romans [i.e., the Byzantines] have neither sciences, nor literature, nor deep ideas, but are just skilful with their hands in the potter's wheel, the woodwork, the sculpture, the weaving of silk materials, they would not rank them among the cultivated people but rather suppress their names from the Book of the philosophers and the learned. In fact the *Logic*, the treatise *On generation and corruption*, the *Meteorology* and other works were of Aristotle, who was neither Christian nor Roman; the *Almagest* is a work by Ptolemy, who was neither Christian nor Roman; the *Euclidean Geometry* is of Euclid, who was neither Christian nor Roman; the *Medicine* is of Galen, who was neither Christian nor Roman; and the same goes for the works of Demokritos, Hippokrates, Plato ...²

The influence of Islam upon Byzantium has traditionally tended to be seen in terms of religion, stressing for example the influence of Islamic aniconism on Byzantine iconoclasm. This version of events is again as old as the Byzantine iconophilia that disseminated it. At the same time, any substantial influence of Islam on Byzantine literary and scientific culture has until recently usually been denied in modern research, as in the classic study by Paul Lemerle, who considered the

¹ Gutas (1998). Sidney Griffith is presently working on a much-demanded monograph on the role the Christians played in the Abbasid Renaissance in philosophy and sciences.

² I take the passage from the French translation of Allouche (1939) 134. For the polemics of Jāhīz against Christianity see the overview of Thomas (2009).

Byzantine revival the sole result of an internal development, without any real impact of the Abbasid philhellenism. We can quote here his words for the sake of clarity:

Il faut bien constater que si l'on peut parler d'un mouvement qui fit partiellement passer l'hellénisme antique dans l'islamisme, nous n'avons aucune preuve, ni même aucun indice, d'un mouvement en sens inverse, allant de l'Islam vers les pays de langue grecque, vers Byzance. Bagdad a disposé, à l'intérieur du califat, de nombreux manuscrits syriaques et de quelques manuscrits grecs, et s'est peut-être encore procuré certains textes à Byzance, bien qu'il me semble que les témoignages qu'on invoque à ce sujet soient souvent exagérés ou même légendaires: nous n'avons pas d'exemples de manuscrits venus du califat dans l'Empire byzantin. En autres termes, on constate à cette époque une évidente transmission indirecte de l'hellénisme antique sur l'islamisme, mais aucun signe d'une transmission indirecte de l'hellénisme antique à l'hellénisme médiéval, byzantin, par le détour de l'Islam.³

Both approaches are in a certain sense valid. But they leave aside some important aspects that need to be carefully assessed if we want to go closer to the whole truth, not just to a part of it. To begin with, nobody can deny today that the blossoming of Hellenism in Baghdad since the beginning of the ninth century stood a world apart from the general abandonment and neglect of the classical Greek heritage in contemporary Byzantium, especially if we value this heritage not just in terms of knowledge of the ancient literature, but from the diffusion of philosophy and sciences. Of course, the blackened panoramic of an ignorant iconoclasm, promoted by the iconophiles, has been revisited over many years, in fact since Lemerle's study. We can refer easily now to the studies of Paul Speck or more recently of Paul Magdalino.⁴ Still, this limited interest in astrology and sciences in the iconoclast period, especially in connection with a cosmological vision of the orthodoxy, does not sustain any comparison with the intellectual effervescence in Baghdad.

It is therefore a priori unlikely that Byzantium as such contributed to the development of the sciences in the Abbasid caliphate. This does not, however, exclude the fact that the Byzantine emperors exploited the prestige of the Hellenic culture which the empire continued to represent. In fact, the passage of Jāhīz we quoted above is understandable in the context of a polemic between the two worlds and would perhaps never have been written if the supposed cultural backwardness of the Byzantines were self-evident. Moreover, that the Byzantines continued to enjoy some prestige in the Middle East is in fact evidenced by the appeal the three Melkite patriarchs wrote to Theophilos, as we saw in Chapter 21.6. The same

³ Lemerle (1971) 29. See in general the second chapter of his book, "L'hypothèse du relais syro-arabe," 21–42.

⁴ See especially Speck (1974a), Magdalino (2006), but also Brubaker and Haldon (2011) for the general context.

could be said of the conversion of the Persian Khurramites to Christianity that we dealt with in Chapter 9. Even the resistance of the Byzantines against the invasion of Thomas (backed by the Arabs: see Chapter 13) and the campaigns of the caliphs Ma'mūn and Mu'taṣim (Chapters 14–17) speak in a certain way for the strength of the orthodoxy in the face of the all-pervading threat of Islam.

Nevertheless, these points certify more the endurance of the Byzantine model before Islam than its diffusion. The nature of the mutual or bidirectional exchange is in much need of careful research, which could provide fresh evidence and shed light on the matter. Many Arabic sources remain unedited or badly assessed, so that dependency and relations of the Melkites with Constantinople remain to a great extent hypothetical.⁵ In Byzantium, for its part, the reception of ancient authors, especially philosophers and scientists, may eventually yield new data if approached not just as a process of textual transmission, but from the perspective of the ideological meaning of the texts, many of which were copied and studied simultaneously in both Byzantium and the caliphate.⁶ But the main problem remains that many intellectual exchanges were not recorded by the more or less “official” writers in both empires, insofar as they lived far away from the frontier and ignored the spontaneous processes of acculturation taking place in border regions.⁷ A particularly interesting case, most relevant to our purpose here, is the so-called Byzantine–Arabic frontier epic, which attests the continuous development of similar literary patterns at the two sides of the frontier beyond the cultural divide apparently alienating the two imperial powers:⁸ the popular character of this genre is already a serious warning against considering the interaction process only from the point of view of the ruling elites, ignoring the part played in it by the common population. Accordingly, much research must be done before we are able to construct a holistic theory that could explain the nature of the intellectual and cultural exchanges between the two empires. As is increasingly recognised,

⁵ Signes Codoñer (2013b), (2013c).

⁶ A first step was provided by the overview of Magdalino (2006). More on this point below in Chapter 24.2.

⁷ This perspective of the “centre” is evident even in the account of the military campaigns taking place in the frontier areas between the caliphate and the Byzantine Empire, as we saw in Chapters 13–17. Thus it was only the presence of the caliph in the campaigns against Byzantium in the 830s that provides us with good and detailed reports in the Arab sources of what actually happened. This makes a striking contrast with those other military expeditions where the caliph was absent and of which Arab sources give us scarcely any information. As for Byzantium, although the case is not so extreme, it is evident that the historians are better informed about Theophilos’ private life and goings-on in the capital than about the actual development of the campaigns led by the emperor in Anatolia, a circumstance that prompted many errors and duplications when the historians tried to order and identify the events mentioned in passing in their sources.

⁸ We already argued in Chapter 6.4 for a popular origin for the sources about Manuel the Armenian. For the common roots of the Byzantine–Arabic epic see Canard (1935) and (1961).

material culture empires play a role in this attempt but I am unable to deal properly with this field in the context of the present book.⁹

Benjamin Jokisch does not appear to follow all these caveats in his recent book entitled *Islamic Imperial Law*, which is directly relevant to the problems we are discussing here. Despite its simple (and uninformative) title, the book is mainly concerned with the “intertwinedness” of Byzantine and Islamic cultures during the first four centuries of the history of Islam. The main thesis of the work, to follow the author’s own words, is as follows:

Islamic law came into being as a coherent and universal legal system at the end of the 8th century. It was not developed by independent religious scholars (jurists’ law), but codified in Baghdad on behalf of the state (imperial law) on the pattern of the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* of Justinian I. This conclusion is the outcome of a more systematic type of reception analysis, which presupposes text-based receptions and a highly complex network of textual, terminological, structural, conceptual, societal and chronological parallels.

The codification of Islamic law and the shift from imperial to jurists’ law must be seen in a context, which both goes beyond the narrow context of Islam and includes non-legal fields such as theology, politics and philosophy. One factor essential for the understanding of the early history of Islamic law is Byzantium. From the outset, the Islamic and the Byzantine Empires formed part of one and the same historical context, their theological, political, cultural and legal developments being inseparably connected with each other. In both states religion became a highly political problem, which ultimately culminated in the triumph of orthodoxy and the subordination of the state to religious law. The following points help to illustrate this intertwinedness.¹⁰

These words may perhaps flatter the ears of the Byzantinists, for therein is recognized the influence that the Byzantine political model of a centralized state exerted upon the Abbasids through the codificatory system of Roman law. However, there are many unfounded presuppositions in Jokisch’s thesis that force us to question his conclusions.¹¹ Certainly, it behoves the legal historian to confirm or deny the validity of the parallels drawn between Islamic and Roman (Byzantine) law, a question that surpasses by far the more limited scope of the present research.

⁹ See for example the remarks of Brubaker and Haldon (2011) 347 about Byzantine silks, whose subject matters “are indicative of cultural – and perhaps technological – exchange between the caliphate and Byzantium.” It is perhaps not coincidental that Jāhiz, in the passage quoted above, singled out the silks as one of the supposed skills of the Byzantines. For an overview on material culture see Brubaker and Haldon (2001) 3–164.

¹⁰ Jokisch (2007) 617.

¹¹ See Brandes (2010) for a thorough and disqualifying review of Jokisch’s thesis that I mostly subscribe to.

But perhaps a few words can be said about the macro- and micro-historic analysis made by Jokisch. They may perhaps serve as a warning about the difficulty of establishing clear-cut lines when speaking of cultural history.

Paraphrasing Dickens, one could say that Jokisch establishes a “Tale of Two Empires” based apparently on the assumption that many events in one power found an immediate counterpart in the other.¹² But the events compared are in most cases of a very disparate nature, like the compilation of the *Ekloge* by the Isaurians (dated 741) and the plan to codify Islamic law (begun in 756). To refer to the reign of Theophilos, Ma’mūn’s edict on the creation of Qur’an and the initiation of the Miḥna (the so-called Inquisition) in 833 is seen as the event fostering a supposed iconoclastic edict of Theophilos dated in 833.¹³ Moreover, Jokisch considers that the polemic on icons in the Byzantine Empire directly affected the ideological parties at Baghdad, for he compares the triumph of dyotheletism at the sixth ecumenical council (680–681) with the second *fitna* of the Alids (680–692); the Abbasid revolution (749) with the council of Hiercia (754); or even the seventh ecumenical council (787) with the beginning of the Mu’tazila. The ambitious scheme collapses when each single item is scrutinized.

Something similar can be said of Jokisch’s attempt to connect the revival of Greek letters and culture in Byzantium not only with a more or less permanent stay of some Byzantine intellectuals in Baghdad (taking as model the famous embassy of Photios in Baghdad, where, according to Hemmerdinger he wrote his *Bibliothèque*), but also with the Arab origins of some of the most reputed intellectuals of Byzantium. He thus identifies Leo the Philosopher with Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, the Geber of the medieval west, basing this on very superficial coincidences and a lack of detailed circumstantial evidence about their lives, which were apparently contemporary;¹⁴ or Photios with a certain Fathyūn who lived in Baghdad at the time and became the teacher of Ibn Kullāb, an outstanding theologian who died c. 855.¹⁵ John the Grammarian is also made to spend the first part of his life in Baghdad.¹⁶ The details provided about these personages in the previous pages of our study, if not just a swift look onto the *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit* or the *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire*, are enough to immediately consign these prosopographical identifications to the realms of fantasy.

More prudent and calculated steps are needed in order to establish a close connection between persons, ideas, works and events in Byzantium and Islam. We will assess anew the evidence, for the most part already well known to scholars, in order to get a more balanced impression of cultural trends than the one Jokisch provides in his study. We will begin with some brief remarks about the ways through which the Byzantine Empire might have tried to exert or defend

¹² See especially Jokisch (2007) 439–515.

¹³ Jokisch (2007) 500–501.

¹⁴ Jokisch (2007) 347–57.

¹⁵ Jokisch (2007) 357–86.

¹⁶ Jokisch (2007) 353–5.

its cultural supremacy on the east at the time (Chapter 24.1). Then we will proceed to assess the influence of the east on Byzantine literary culture itself, basing this mainly on conclusions reached by previous scholars (Chapter 24.2).

Chapter 24

A Bidirectional Exchange?

24.1 Byzantine Cultural Influence in the East

The first question to be asked is whether the prestige of the Byzantine Empire in the east was limited just to political and religious matters or also extended to the cultural sphere. And especially, how could the Byzantines have “exported” their “cultural goods” to the east?

First and foremost, this occurred through the Melkites, who acted in a certain sense as a Byzantine fifth column inside the Abbasid caliphate. It is revealing that one of the main representatives of the Melkites at the beginning of the ninth century, Michael the Synkellos of the patriarch of Jerusalem, wrote c. 810–813 a manual of Greek syntax that became a reference work during the whole Byzantine period and evidences the importance the knowledge of Greek had for the orientals.¹ Since Arabic was already the *lingua franca* of the Melkites at the time (as evidenced by the work of Abū Qurra), it is highly dubious that Michael wrote this treatise just to improve the liturgical or ecclesiastical Greek of the churchmen. If this was his goal, the treatise is not fit for the task, for it is indeed classical Greek that is taken as a basis for the exposition. As a consequence, the most frequent quotations are taken from Homer, in fact dozens of lines, most frequently from the two first books.² There are also single quotations of Alkman, Menander, Aristophanes and Epicharmos. In contrast, there are a few citations from the Old Testament (almost all of them from the Psalms) though slightly more from the New Testament (the Gospels and the Pauline letters). Among the proper names, the Homeric heroes figure prominently, in fact more than 30 of them appear again and again in the text, Achilles being the most quoted. Most frequent are the names of Plato (we also have three quotations of his dialogues) and Socrates. In contrast Christian personalities seldom appear, with the exception perhaps of Peter, Paul and John.

Obviously there is nothing new in Michael’s grammatical knowledge or in his quoting of Homer, for he follows the classical grammar, as many other Byzantine grammarians will do after him.³ But if Greek grammatical writing during the Byzantine period aimed at the understanding and imitation of the classical texts, we must conclude that Michael’s continued to have the same purpose. Since according to the title Michael composed the grammar in Edessa (σχεδιασθεῖσα

¹ Donnet (1982).

² See index in Donnet (1982) 521–2.

³ A history of Byzantine grammar is an urgent desideratum. For the moment see Robins (1993).

ἐν Ἐδέσση τῆς Μεσοποταμίας) at the request of the deacon Lazaros, we must conclude that an accurate knowledge of ancient Greek was in demand there. Considering the increasing interest in Greek philosophers and scientists in contemporary Baghdad, the composition of this grammar could be perhaps be connected with the attempt of the local Melkite community to promote the study of these ancient texts, for which the other Christian churches (and especially the Nestorians) were providing translations for Muslim intellectuals. In fact, the deacon Lazaros is called “philosopher” (actually φιλόσοφος καὶ λογοθέτης) in the title of the work, although the exact meaning of this term may be disputable.

The knowledge of ancient Greek literature itself, beyond the expertise on scientific or technical works, continued to be regarded as a prestigious and rewarding occupation. Suffice it to say that Homer was even used by Christians in the theological debates against the contemporary Muslims, as appears in the reply to Ibn al-Munajjim composed at a later stage by the Melkite Qusṭā Ibn Lūqā (835–912), who compares the formation of Homer’s text with the Qur’an and even the poet himself with the prophet Muḥammad.⁴ Qusṭā Ibn Lūqā thus betrays a firsthand acquaintance with the work of Homer and his reception, and even with the Peisistratid traditions about the genesis of the written version of the epic.⁵

In any event, if the Melkites were interested in preserving the study of Greek as a part of their cultural heritage, we can surmise that the Byzantines could have been instrumental in helping them to accomplish this task. It is perhaps not coincidental that another of the Greek grammars written at this time is the summary of Charax’s canones on the noun and the verb by the Melkite patriarch Sophronios (c. 848–860),⁶ to whom the *Annals* of Eutychios attribute the sending of an epistle on icon worship to the emperor Theophilos.⁷ This survival of Greek in Melkite milieux of the ninth century could perhaps be a result of a still pervading Byzantine influence in the Middle East, despite the increase in Christian conversion to Islam, despite even the cultural blossoming in Baghdad, and, evidently, despite the increasingly predominant use of Arabic instead of Greek by the Melkites.⁸

⁴ Qusṭā Ibn Lūqā, *Letter to Ibn al-Munajjim* §§148–52 and 208–11, trans. Samir and Nwyia (1981) 122–5 and 146–9.

⁵ For Homer among the Arabs and his translation into Syriac by Theophilos of Edessa (d. 785) see Kraemer (1956–1957). See also Strohmeier (1980). For the Peisistratid edition of Homer see the overview in Signes Codoñer (2004b) esp. 237–94.

⁶ Σωφρονίου πατριάρχου Ἀλεξανδρίας πρὸς τὸν ἀββᾶν Ἰωάννην ἐπίσκοπον Ταμιάθεως σχόλια σύντομα ἐκ τῶν τοῦ Χάρακος πρὸς εἰσαγομένους εἰς τοὺς ὀνομαστικὸς καὶ ῥηματικὸς κανόνας, in Hilgard (1894) 373–434.

⁷ For the person of the patriarch see in PmbZ #6847 and PBE s.v. “Sophronius 4”. For a discussion of his role in the composition of an iconophile letter to Theophilos see Chapter 21.4. For the recent discovery of an interlinear paraphrase of the *Iliad* by Sophronios see Nicolopoulos (2003).

⁸ For a recent panoramic overview of this issue, with bibliography, see Monferrer Sala (2012a).

This influence might also have been exerted through the sending of Greek books to the caliphate, whose historicity was questioned by Lemerle, as we have seen. Many reports have been preserved, mainly in Arabic sources, pointing to the existence of what can be called the “diplomacy of the book”.⁹ Manuscripts containing the works of Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, Euclid and Ptolemy were bestowed by the emperor on the caliph as a token of good will, probably in order to facilitate diplomatic exchanges after the continuous military clashes of the period. Most of the items of information are related to the person of Ma’mūn and preserve no further date, not even naming the Byzantine emperor who was responsible for the sending of the texts, although we can surmise that Theophilus participated in this practice. The increasing interest in the scientific and philosophic heritage of the Greeks was undoubtedly the cause that moved the Byzantine emperors to respond to the demands of the Abbasid caliphs by sending them copies of the texts they wished for. This was not of course the only way for the Abbasids to obtain the books, for most of them were already preserved in the lands of the caliphate. Furthermore, scientific expeditions into Byzantine territory are well documented. An intellectual such as Ḥunayn ibn-Ishāq, one of the leading translators of Ma’mūn, is said to have been in Constantinople to improve his Greek and to find books for important librarians of Baghdad. His would not have been an isolated case.¹⁰ Finally, Arabic law books of the period contain instructions about which books are to be preserved among those pillaged from the Byzantines during a military campaign: the texts of medical and scientific content are especially valued.¹¹

As we see, contemporary Arabic sources did not ignore the importance of the Byzantine Empire as a repository of old books. But did the Byzantines merely content themselves with the occasional sending of the requested books or did they also foster Greek culture in the east more actively as a way of increasing their cultural prestige? It is difficult to answer this question, as no Byzantine source has been preserved where the sending of Greek texts to the Abbasids is mentioned, not even in passing. This cannot be a coincidence, but a result of some patriotic stance of the Byzantine sources of the period, the authors of which may have felt uneasy about this transfer of their scientific heritage to the rival empire, where Greek ancient texts were intensively studied and researched whereas they were generally neglected in Byzantium. We will consider below this “patriotic” reaction as one possible trigger for what Lemerle called Byzantine humanism, but first we will approach the question of how significant the Byzantine authorities understood their sending of Greek books to the Arabs to be.

The Byzantines apparently chose very carefully the books they sent as gifts to the courts of the powers with which they had diplomatic exchanges. This is the

⁹ Signes Codoñer (1996). Most of the passages I commented on there were collected in the comprehensive study of Eche (1967). See also Drocourt (2006) 121–4 and (2008) 69–82.

¹⁰ Signes Codoñer (1996) 170–71.

¹¹ Signes Codoñer (1996) 161–2.

case in the sending of a copy of the work of Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite to the Frankish court of Louis the Pious in 827, during the reign of Theophilos' father, Michael of Amorion.¹² Dionysios, who attended the speech of St. Paul at the Areopage according to the Acts of the Apostles 17.16–33, had later been made the author of several Christian treatises of a Neoplatonic flavour dating to the beginning of the sixth century (the most influential among them being the *Celestial Hierarchy*), which in antiquity rivalled the Gospels themselves, thus explaining his popularity among the Byzantines. This made the text appealing enough to western Christians, but it was the fact that this Pseudo-Dionysios merged in the ninth century with the French martyr Denis, the supposed founder of the Paris bishopric, that turned the gift of his work by the Byzantine ambassador into an extraordinary event, asserting at the same time the importance of the Greek–Byzantine heritage in the eyes of contemporary Franks. Although Hilduin, abbot of St. Denis, near Paris, is usually held responsible for the identification of both figures, the future patriarch Methodios could have played some role in the process.¹³ Also significant is that the archpriest Leo of Naples obtained a copy of the *Novel of Alexander* during an embassy of his to Constantinople at the beginning of the tenth century: although the text of Pseudo-Callisthenes stood a world apart from the historical figure of Alexander the Great, it reflected well the importance of the Macedonian king for the ruling dynasty of the Macedonians, whose founder Basil I was presented by Photios as a direct descendant of the famous Greek conqueror.¹⁴ Again, in the tenth century, during the reigns of Romanos Lakapenos and Constantine VII, the sending to the caliph of Cordoba of the texts of the Dioscorides and the Pseudo-Orosius' *Adversus paganos* conveyed a clear political message, especially in the second work, an interpolated version of the original Orosius which enjoyed a broad reception in al-Andalus.¹⁵

It is questionable whether we can extend or apply this model to the sending of books to the Arabs, insofar as the scientific and philosophical texts involved in this exchange, in contrast to the cases we have just mentioned, were not conveyors of a direct political message. Moreover, contrary to what happened in Cordoba in the tenth century, where the Byzantines provided the Cordoban caliph with a Greek translator for Dioscorides' text, the Abbasids had plenty of translators at their disposal and could therefore do without any Byzantine help. Finally, the texts of the ancient Greek philosophers could not be easily connected with contemporary Byzantine culture, which was rather alien to most of them at the time, as Jāhīz rightly pointed out in the text we quoted at the beginning of this section.

¹² Lowden (1992) 250–51.

¹³ Loenertz (1951) and Signes Codoñer (2007b) 411–12.

¹⁴ Pfister (1941), Frugoni (1969) and Signes Codoñer (2007b) 413–14. See also Th. Cont. V, 2–5.

¹⁵ For the embassy see Signes Codoñer (2004a) 211–31 and 241–3. For the text of Orosius see Levi della Vida (1954) and lastly Schilling (2009), with further bibliography.

Under these circumstances it is doubtful that the Byzantines sent the books demanded by the Arabs as luxury copies of old exemplars, made on purpose for the occasion of the embassy, as appears to be the case in the cases quoted above.¹⁶ The possibility must then be envisaged that the Byzantines sent the very antique originals of the Greek texts the Arabs were demanding, since they were initially not especially interested in editing or studying them. It must also be taken into account that the Abbasid translators paid serious attention to the quality and age of the manuscripts they used as a basis for their work, so that it was not enough for them to have just one copy of a given author. They tried to obtain better copies of the works in order to produce better translations. A paradigmatic example of this procedure is the impressive list made by Ḥunayn ibn-Ishāq of all the works of Galen, with their corresponding translations, where he gives frequently details about the good or bad quality or content of the manuscripts used.¹⁷

It may at first seem unlikely that the Byzantines could have sent to the Arabs old parchment copies of the required scientific manuscripts instead of producing new ones. However, this procedure does not go at all against Byzantine diplomatic custom. It suffices here to quote just two cases. The first one is that of the famous *Codex Florentinus*, dating to the sixth century and containing the oldest preserved copy of the Digest. It was still preserved in the ninth century in Constantinople, from where it could have passed to Italy (to Amalfi?) as a consequence of the Byzantine reconquista of the southern part of the peninsula, as a gift from Constantinople to some of the pro-Byzantine rulers of the area.¹⁸ Another well-known example is provided by the *Codex Vaticanus gr.* 1209, dating to the fourth century and containing one of the oldest complete texts of the whole Bible. It probably came to Rome in the fifteenth century, as a gift of the Byzantine emperors during the council of Florence in 1439.¹⁹

As a consequence, it is theoretically conceivable that the Byzantines were sending to the Arabs old manuscripts of ancient Greek philosophers and scientists at a time when these texts were not objects of keen interest in Constantinople. It is interesting to note, although it is an argument *a contrario*, that Arab sources cease to mention the sending of books from the empire after the reign of Ma'mūn, and accordingly under Theophilus.²⁰ As many interesting manuscripts were yet in Byzantine lands and the Abbasid interest in Greek science and philosophy continued

¹⁶ The original manuscript of the text of Pseudo-Dionysios sent by the Byzantines to Louis the Pious has been preserved until now: Par. gr. 437.

¹⁷ See Bergsträsser (1925) with an edition of the original text and a German translation.

¹⁸ For the conjecture and further bibliography see Signes Codoñer and Andrés Santos (2007) 36–8. See Wilson (1992) for the presence in the margin of a minuscule Constantinopolitan gloss of the ninth century.

¹⁹ See Skeat (1984), who conjectured that a hasty restoration of the text took place in Constantinople shortly before the departure of the imperial embassy for Italy.

²⁰ With the exception of the Dioscorides and the Orosius sent by Constantine VII to Cordoba.

well after this date, it is tempting to suppose that some kind of shift took place in Byzantium during these years. In fact, it was Theophilos who appointed Leo the Philosopher the head of the public school of the Forty Martyrs. He was later to be the director of the Magnaura “university” under the regency of Bardas.²¹ Leo, as is well known, is linked to the revival of the sciences and philosophy in Byzantium. And to him are also linked the first preserved copies or the textual tradition of such important names as Ptolemy, Archimedes, Plato and Euclid.²² But it is not we but the Continuator of Theophanes who establishes a direct link between Leo’s career and the end of the information mentioning a flow of scientific manuscripts to the east. The story is well known and has been commented on time and again in modern studies, but it is worth repeating here the principal lines.²³

According to the Continuator, Leo the Philosopher was the most prominent expert in philosophy, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and even music of Theophilos’ time, but he lived in solitude and taught from a secluded location the many students who came to him. One of them, well versed in geometry, was made prisoner by the Muslims during a war under circumstances the narrator seems not to know of (οὐκ οἶδ’ ὅπως), but in any case under the reign of the caliph Ma’mūn, for he is named as the reigning caliph. It happened accordingly between 829 and 833, the years during which the reigns of Theophilos and Ma’mūn coincide.²⁴ The

²¹ Byzantine sources do not agree about the chronology of the events. See *PmbZ* #4440 and *PBE* s.v. “Leo 19” as well as Lemerle (1971) 150–54, 158–60 and Speck (1974a) 1–13.

²² See Irigoín (1962) and Lemerle (1971) 169–72.

²³ *Th. Cont.* IV.27 (185.15–191.3).

²⁴ In the Logothete Leo’s student is said to be in Amorion during its siege and, being an astronomer (αὐτὸς ἀστρονόμος), to have predicted to the caliph, when he had already prepared to retreat (βουληθέντος ὑποχωρῆσαι τοῦ ἀμερμουμνῆ), that the city would be taken in two days’ time. The Muslims waited then until the city came to their hands through the agency of the Byzantine traitor Boiditzes. The student became thus prisoner of the caliph and was conveyed to Baghdad. See *Log. (A), Theophilos* [130] 33–4 (227.237–228.254). Magdalino (1998a) 200–202 and (2006) 65 considers the Logothete’s version to be more realistic than the “almost hagiographic version” of the Continuator, but the story in the Logothete appears to me as a conflation of two different accounts. To begin with, if Leo’s student encouraged the Muslims to wait for another two days and in this way contributed to the taking of the city, he placed himself on the same level as Boiditzes, creating thus an unnecessary duplication of the traitor’s role. In fact, the Continuator says that Boiditzes betrayed the Byzantines at Amorion when the Muslims had already thought of retreating (μέλλουσιν ἤδη πῶς ἀναχωρεῖν). Furthermore, the student’s “astrological” prediction is obviously topical and somehow reflects the astrological sympathies of the caliph to which Magdalino refers in his book. Finally, if Leo’s student is a traitor, the original patriotic message of the story (see below) is lost, for it is he who recommends his master to the caliph! It seems to me therefore possible that the Logothete had notice of some astrological prediction connected with the taking of Amorion and attributed it to Leo’s geometry student, perhaps as he identified with Leo all the profane sciences; and is not astronomy a “geometry of the universe”? The Logothete was in need of a dating to put the history of Leo’s student in a chronological sequence,

student's Muslim master told his Greek slave about the caliph's men's interest in geometry, so that the student wanted to be introduced to them, since he also had knowledge of this science. The caliph agreed and brought the prisoner to court, where the Muslim experts made a display of their expertise in geometry by drawing triangles and quadrangles and referring to the Euclidian canons. However, they did not produce the cause and the reason of their teachings or of the names given, whereby they showed their "ignorance and lack of knowledge, and not an accurate sense of the language" (ἀμαθίαν καὶ ἄγνοιαν, ἀλλ' οὐ στενότητα γλώττης πως ἔχοντες). Leo's student noticed this and rebuked the Muslim experts for taking no heed of the reasons of the rules they just described, thus barring the way for the progress of the science. The student explained to them meticulously how the names came about that designated the different concepts. The Muslims were amazed at this and "asked how many other learned men like him have been brought forward by Byzantium" (ἠρώτων ὀπόσους τὸ Βυζάντιον τοιοῦτους τρέφει ἄνδρας καὶ ἐπιστήμονας). The prisoner told them that there were many other students with his knowledge, but only one master above them, Leo.²⁵

The caliph wrote to Leo promising him the highest honours if he came to Baghdad. He stressed that: "If this happens, the whole race of the Sarracens will bend his neck before him" (εἰ γὰρ οὕτω τοῦτο γένηται, τοὺς ἀχένας σοὶ κλινεῖ γένος ἅπαν τὸ τῶν Σαρακηνῶν). The student successfully carried the letter to Constantinople and after a moving anagnorisis, his master Leo decided to reveal the message's content to the logothete of the dromos, for it could have been dangerous to him to deal secretly with the caliph.²⁶ The logothete submitted the letter to the emperor, who had no previous knowledge of Leo's merits.²⁷ Theophilus then put Leo in charge of the Church of the Forty Martyrs with a public post as teacher. The caliph did not desist from contacting Leo, however,

for which the story provided no clue. It is perhaps for this reason that the Continuator chose to include the episode under the reign of Michael III in the context of his narrative of the life of Leo.

²⁵ See Signes Codoñer (2002) 420–21 for a story told across nights 307–8 of the *Thousand and One Nights*, where the learned scientists of the caliph Ma'mūn are ridiculed by an unknown rag-wearing foreigner who appears before his court. The anonymous foreigner is thereafter held by the caliph in the highest honour.

²⁶ The Continuator expressly identifies Theoktistos as the logothete, but this provides no help for the dating. Although we know that Theoktistos was Logothete at the end of Theophilus' reign, we do not know the date of his appointment, so that he could have been in charge shortly after Theophilus' ascension to power, as he was an important figure already under Michael II. See *PmbZ* #8050 and *PBE* s.v. "Theoktistos 3."

²⁷ If we give credence to this fiction and Theophilus indeed took notice of Leo's merits only after the caliph tried to invite him to Baghdad, this could be further evidence for dating the episode at the beginning of his reign, for Leo might have worked for Theophilus in the fortification of Loulon between 831 and 832, as we argued in Chapter 16.4. In fact, if Leo was a relative of John, as we know, he must have been known to the emperor at a very early stage, for John was the teacher of Theophilus.

and wrote to him anew confronting him with some geometrical and astronomical questions. To these Leo answered in a wholly satisfactory way, so the story goes, adding even further predictions to the problems requested. The perplexed caliph decided then to write a letter to the emperor, in which he declared himself ready to go to Constantinople as a student and friend (ἐβουλόμην μὲν αὐτὸς ἀφικέσθαι σοι, ἔργον φίλου τε καὶ μαθητοῦ ἐκπληρῶν). However, since the caliph was impeded from doing so because of his duties as ruler, he begged Theophilos to allow Leo to come to Baghdad, even for a short stay, so that he could impart his science and virtue to the caliph on a teaching basis, for Ma'mūn was highly impassioned about this (τρόπῳ διδασκαλίας τῆς αὐτοῦ ἐπιστήμης μεταδιδόντα καὶ ἀρετῆς τῷ οὕτως ἔχοντι ἔμοι πρὸς ἐκείνας ἐρωτικῶς). The caliph added to this invitation that Theophilos ought not to postpone his decision in regard of the fact that the caliph neither spoke his language nor shared his faith, but must instead take into account the importance of the person who made the offer. He even went on to promise him 20 centenaria and an everlasting peace treaty between the two powers. This is how the emperor tackled the issue according to the Continuator:

Theophilos, however, considering it absurd and inappropriate to give one's own goods to others and to deliver to the people the knowledge of essential matters by which the race of the Romans is admired and honoured by all the nations, did not comply with his petition, but holding this man instead in higher honour, ordered John, who was by then holding sway on the patriarchal throne, to appoint him to the metropolis of the Thessalonicians,²⁸ for he was full of wisdom and even close to him as a relative.²⁹

²⁸ If we accept the communis opinio, John the Grammarian would have been appointed patriarch either in 837 or in 838 and accordingly Leo could have been in charge of the see of Thessalonike only in the very last years of Theophilos' reign. However, as we already argued in Chapters 19.1 and 21.3 (note 58) – to which I refer for bibliographical references and a short discussion – it is not altogether clear that John became patriarch at so late a stage of Theophilos' reign and the possibility must remain open that he ascended the throne as early as 832. As the caliph Ma'mūn died in 833, the early appointment of John would perhaps fit better in the chronological sequence of our story. Nevertheless, even admitting that John was appointed patriarch in 838 and that Leo became bishop of Thessalonike after this year, this does not necessarily question the dating of the story during the early years of Theophilos' reign. In fact, after the first letter of Ma'mūn Theophilos had already appointed Leo as teacher of the Church of the Forty Martyrs. The appointment as bishop of Thessalonike should have taken place some time later and surely not as a consequence of a second letter of Ma'mūn, as stated in the text, but in relation with the promotion of John to the patriarchate, be it in 832 or in 838. But the Continuator (or his source) obviously summarizes the sequence of the events and presents the late appointment of Leo as bishop as a result of a second letter from the caliph, which provides a kind of explanation for Leo's further promotion.

²⁹ Th. Cont. IV.27 (190.18–191.3): ἀλλ' ὁ Θεόφιλος ἄποπον κρίνας καὶ ἄλογον τὸ οἰκεῖον δοῦναι ἑτέροις καλὸν καὶ τὴν τῶν ὄντων γνῶσιν ἔκδοτον ποιῆσαι τοῖς ἔθνεσι, δι' ἧς τὸ Ῥωμαίων γένος θαυμάζεται τε καὶ τιμᾶται παρὰ πᾶσιν, ἐκείνῳ μὲν οὐκ ἐπένευσε, τοῦτον

It goes without saying that the story's purpose was to counteract Arab propaganda (as represented by Jāhīz's quote at the beginning of this chapter) and put the knowledge of sciences in Byzantium at a higher level than in contemporary Baghdad. In the story, the caliph appears almost desperate to get in touch with a learned Byzantine such as Leo, to whom Theophilos had paid hitherto no attention at all, as if he considered the study of the sciences amongst the Byzantines as something obvious to which no further importance should be attached. However, when he realizes that the Byzantine knowledge of sciences is coveted by the mighty neighbour, he proceeds to protect his "patrimony" by funding a public chair for Leo in the Church of the Forty Martyrs and prohibiting him from travelling abroad.

This patriotic stance is indeed similar to other stories we know. The Continuator himself, for instance, tells us how the mighty Roman Krateros, a eunuch, defeated an Arab in a single fight before the emperor Theophilos during the celebration of a triumph in Constantinople.³⁰ Although the Arab made a display of his skills by handling two spears at the same time when riding, Krateros, with one single spear at hand, "hurled the Saracen down faster than words can describe", after saying that "in war there is no need of such artifices" (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐν πολέμῳ τοιαύτης χρεία ἀδολεσχίας). The image of the rude soldier smiting with one stroke the performance-oriented Arab warrior strikes us vividly and reminds us of similar scenes in old films: the subtleties of the east give way before the plain-and-direct approach of the west. But in our case it also betrays some scorn for culture and artifice, or perhaps even an inferiority complex.³¹

The same willingness to surpass their proud neighbours in the east appears in the narrative of the embassy of John to the Arabs as told again by the Continuator. This time, the Byzantine spends enormous sums in gifts and gold to impress his hosts in Baghdad and makes a costly golden vessel, studded with precious gems, to be lost as if by chance. When the Arabs are already lamenting the loss, the ambassador produces on the spot another vessel of the same value with a sign of utter indifference that astonishes his hosts.³²

However, in the case of the story of Leo and the caliph Ma'mūn the rivalry of the two empires is expressly connected with the cultural arena and this, as far as I know, is quite exceptional for the time. We detect in fact in the sources of the period an increasing awareness of the importance of the knowledge of the sciences and philosophy of the past, as maybe is evidenced in some saints' lives when speaking about the education of their heroes.³³ But the defence of the cultural superiority of the Byzantines before the Arabs appears only, beyond

δὲ διὰ τιμῆς πλείονος σχὼν τὸν Ἰωάννην τοῦ πατριαρχικοῦ τότε θρόνου ἀντιπιοῦμενον κατὰ τὴν Θεσσαλονικέων μητρόπολιν, καὶ ὡς πλήρη σοφίας ὄντα καὶ ὡς οἰκειοῦμενον τούτῳ κατὰ συγγένειαν, χειροτονεῖν ἐγκελεύεται.

³⁰ For a comment on this passage see Chapter 8.2.

³¹ Th. Cont. III.23 (114.17–116.8). See Signes Codoñer (1995) 504–6.

³² Th. Cont. III.9 (95.19–99.3). See Signes Codoñer (1995) 412–14.

³³ See Moffat (1977) and Signes Codoñer (2002a) 412–19.

this source, in the Slavonic *Life of Constantine*, the apostle to the Slavs with his brother Methodios. The saint, who is significantly presented as a student of Leo the Philosopher (and of Photios), is sent to Baghdad in an embassy,³⁴ which he makes into an occasion for a debate with the Arabs.³⁵ The debate is mainly of a theological nature, as is to be expected in a hagiographic work, but it includes two relevant short references to the profane wisdom of the Arab scholar who discusses with Constantine the main issues of Christian doctrine. In the first one, it is said only that the Arabs were wise and expert in letters and that they knew “geometry, astronomy and the other disciplines”. It is from this apparent superiority that they try first to refute Constantine in his defence of Christian dogma. When they repeatedly fail in their purpose, they resort to their expertise in these fields and “to put him to the test, made him thereafter answer many other questions about all the disciplines they knew”. The saint is said to have answered all of the questions and “have even defeated them in these matters”. The Arabs, apparently surprised, ask him how he could have known all these things. Constantine answers through a parable by saying that the Arabs are just drawing water from the Byzantine sea and concludes: “It is from us that all the sciences come”.

The passage vindicates Byzantium, so to speak, which holds the patent on the knowledge on which the Arabs are made to depend and even claims for Constantine a better expertise than his learned rivals. But, as in Leo’s story, we are dealing again with an apologetic text, for the Arabs do not apparently expect in Constantine any competence in the field of the sciences. This emphasis on cultural supremacy appears as a novelty in the narrative of Constantine’s embassy, whereas the shrewd tricks by which the saint overcomes the traps of his hosts are almost a *locus communis* in the stories about embassies of the time. It suffices here to quote the famous report of the Andalusian poet Ghazāl on his embassy to Constantinople under Theophilos, a text full of cunning and witty replies of the Arab, who thus ridicules the pomp and the haughtiness of the Byzantine court.³⁶

Both the display of knowledge by Leo’s student and the vindication of Byzantium as the “repository” of sciences by Constantine in front of their learned Muslim hosts are essentially polemics against the claims of contemporary Islam to be the sole and rightful heir to the scientific and philosophical heritage of Greek antiquity. But at the same time these literary episodes prove exactly the opposite of what they try to demonstrate, for emphasis on the cultural superiority of the Byzantines would not be needed if this were in fact not questioned at all. As the backwardness of Byzantium in the field of sciences in the first half of

³⁴ Perhaps during the regency of Theodora for Michael III after 843; see Lemerle (1971) 160–63.

³⁵ *Life of Constantine*, chapter 5 (354–8).

³⁶ For a detailed analysis of the Arabic text of this embassy and its sources see Signes Codoñer (2001). For an overview of commonplaces and literary embellishment of the accounts of the embassies to Constantinople between 800 and 1096 see Signes Codoñer (2007c). See also Chapter 18.2.

the ninth century as compared with Islam cannot be denied, we find here a clear explanation for these two apologetic reports. But what really matters is that these reports express Byzantine awareness of the cultural challenge posed by the Arabs and suggest at the same time that the Byzantines began to promote the study of the sciences as an answer to the appropriation of the Greek legacy by Baghdad. The origins of the Byzantine “renaissance”, may be sought along the so-called “road to Baghdad”, although in a more subtle and indirect way than traditionally supposed.³⁷ We will consider this point in the next section.

24.2 The Road to Baghdad

As well as being worried about the growth of a legitimate “Roman” Empire in the west (especially after the crowning of Charles the Great in 800), it is natural that the Byzantines also felt concerned about the increasing interest of the Abbasids in the Greek scientific and philosophic heritage. The Muslim Empire thus legitimated its claims to a permanent rule over a vast Christian population of the Middle East that had partly sided with the new Arab lords in the aftermath of the conquest of the seventh century against the “Chalkedonians” of Constantinople.³⁸ Perhaps the Melkite call to the emperor expressed in the *Letter to Theophilus*, if indeed genuine (see Chapter 21.8), expresses some concern for the increasing isolation of the “Chalkedonians” in the Middle East, and not only the hopes for a reversal of the status quo following imperial victories in the region. But in any case, the claims of the Abbasid scholars to be the intellectual heirs of antiquity undermined the rights of the Byzantine Empire to be the universal power. It was natural that the Abbasid “renaissance” worried Constantinople and triggered a reaction.

Paul Speck was perhaps the first scholar after the influential study of Paul Lemerle to focus on the Abbasid “renaissance” of the ninth century as one of the main causes that moved contemporary Byzantines back to the study of Greek science and philosophy during the iconoclastic period.³⁹ Speck’s suggestion relied on scarcely any source material beyond the famous letter of Ma’mūn to Theophilus on behalf of Leo the Philosopher, for there was by then no direct evidence available which could confirm his theories. However, as Paul Magdalino rightly remarked some time later, when commenting upon the impact of the Abbasid “renaissance” upon Byzantium:

How did this impressive cultural achievement impinge on the consciousness of learned Byzantines? Hardly at all, if one is to judge from their almost total lack of comment, and their exclusive reference to their own past. However, ... one cannot judge the impact of a foreign culture on Byzantine intellectual life

³⁷ Magdalino (1998a).

³⁸ For the perception of Islam by eastern Christians see Hoyland (1997).

³⁹ Speck (1984b), (1987) and (1998).

simply by a literal reading of explicit comments in Byzantine sources. One has to recognize that rejection, whether expressed through adverse comment or through silence, may be a rhetorical attitude, which does not preclude reception and may actually be used to disguise it. The important thing is to look carefully at evidence for contacts. The fact that such evidence actually exists at all for the ninth century is remarkable.⁴⁰

Magdalino found evidence in the fact that three intellectuals of the ninth century known to have had dealings with the caliph – John the Grammarian and Leo Choirosphaktes in embassies and Leo the Philosopher through an exchange of letters – were all reputed to have promoted the study of astronomy in Byzantium.⁴¹ He even succeeded in proving the growing interest in astronomy in Byzantium towards the end of the eighth century, which he connected with the figure of Pankratios, the father of John the Grammarian and astrologer at the Byzantine court in 792. Magdalino also pointed to the increasing number of astronomical tables at about the same period and attributed to the Grammarian a crucial role in the recovery of astronomical science. He finally suggested that the Grammarian could have been responsible for Greek scholia to Ptolemy dating to the years 829–830, which contain astronomical observations made in the caliphate in 829.⁴² As one scholion dates an astronomical observation made at Damascus “approximately” (ἐγγιστα) to the second regnal year of Theophilos, that is to say, October 830 to October 831,⁴³ Magdalino suggested that this circumstance might point not to the year when the observation was actually made, but when it was recorded by the scholion’s source, which could have been the Grammarian himself during his embassy to the east in this very same year.⁴⁴ I am not sure about the linking of the Grammarian with the scholion’s source, for this latter expresses some doubts about the dating of the observation which are not easy to explain if a contemporary recorded it and rather point to a faulty conversion from a Hegira dating to a regnal year. This, however, does not diminish the importance of the scholion as a witness to the awareness of Arabic astronomy amongst the Byzantines in Theophilos’ time.

In his study on Abbasid philhellenism Dimitri Gutas added new evidence to support the Arab influence on the Byzantines’ renewed interest in scientific knowledge. He drew a table of all the known Greek secular manuscripts of the ninth century along with the dating of their corresponding translation in the Islamic world.⁴⁵ The table shows an almost perfect correlation between the Greek texts

⁴⁰ Magdalino (1998a) 196.

⁴¹ Magdalino (1998a) 206–8.

⁴² Magdalino (2006) 55–65.

⁴³ Mogenet (1975) 309: γέγονε δὲ καὶ νεώτερα τήρησις ἐπὶ τῶν Σαρακηνῶν ἐν Δαμάσκῳ κατὰ τοὺς τοῦ Θεοφιλοῦ χρόνους ἔτει δευτέρῳ ἐγγιστα τῆς βασιλείας ἐκείνου.

⁴⁴ Magdalino (1998a) 209–10.

⁴⁵ Gutas (1998) 181–6.

that appear in the Byzantine manuscripts of the first half of the ninth century and the works which were translated into Arabic during the same period. Moreover, almost all the works copied in Byzantium during these 50 years are of a scientific nature, and indeed predominantly astronomical and mathematical. Faced with this evidence Gutas concluded:

It seems clear that the correlation is causally related. There are two basic alternatives: either the Greek manuscripts were copied in imitation or as a response to the Arabic translation of these works (however this “imitation” or “response” is to be understood as stemming organically from Byzantine society – a problem for Byzantinists to resolve), or they were copied because of specific Arab demand and under commission for these works. It may not be a matter of choice between the two insofar as both may have been operative.⁴⁶

Obviously the table drawn by Gutas is approximate and must be improved in many points, especially because he did not take into account the miscellaneous manuscripts that have been studied with some care and detail in the last years.⁴⁷ However, on the whole it confirms that no independent parallel interest in the same scientific authors could have arisen simultaneously in Constantinople and Baghdad and that, considering the broad dimension of the Arab translation movement, the sense of the influence ran definitely westwards. Gutas’ table also confirms what Magdalino later demonstrated, namely that the study of astronomy and astrology in the period went far beyond the traditional interest in occult sciences that had always attracted emperors anxious to know about the future, and was inextricably bound to a cosmogonic vision of the world characteristic of the iconoclastic orthodoxy and inherited from the period following the Arabic invasion.⁴⁸

Any further progress in this field would inevitably go through a minute study of the Greek manuscript evidence in search of links with the eastern world. I would perhaps exclude the second alternative suggested by Gutas, namely that some of the preserved Greek scientific manuscripts of the ninth century were produced or copied in connection with Arab demand, for in that case we must seek an explanation for them being preserved in Byzantium and not sent to the east. An oriental origin seems a priori unlikely, as they could not be related to the east either by manufacture or by dependence of an oriental archetype. That Byzantine ambassadors could be lavished with books during their stay in Baghdad is altogether likely, as the Byzantines also used books as gifts in their diplomatic exchanges, as we have seen above. But, as far as I know, no evidence relating a Byzantine manuscript to an oriental archetype has been produced and

⁴⁶ Gutas (1998) 184–5.

⁴⁷ Ronconi (2007).

⁴⁸ Magdalino (2006) 33–54.

Hemmerdinger's theory that Photios composed the reviews for his *Bibliothēke* basing it on books he consulted in Baghdad remains today widely rejected.⁴⁹

In any case, although we could prove the eastern provenance of some scholia (as done so already with the scholia to Ptolemy) or even some texts, this is not the evidence we must look for in order to prove the influence of the Abbasid "renaissance" on Byzantium. Or to put it in other words: the scant evidence that could eventually be collected for the eastern provenance of the Greek manuscripts would not minimize the impact of the Abbasid "renaissance" on the Byzantines. In fact, it is, as Gutas said, almost certainly in imitation or response to the Abbasid "renaissance" that the Byzantines began to copy and probably to transliterate into minuscule the texts of the Greek scientists and philosophers who were for the most part preserved in their own libraries, be they provincial or not. A search for manuscripts probably began in Byzantium at this time, but it is to be doubted that it went beyond the borders of the empire. Surely there were exceptions, and some archetypes of our transmission could have come from the east, but this evidence, if any, has probably been lost with the passing of centuries.

Therefore manuscripts have not afforded substantive evidence for proving beyond any reasonable doubt the dependence of the Byzantine revival on the blossoming of sciences and philosophy in contemporary Baghdad. This dependence remains however a strong likelihood, when one considers the wide cultural context and takes into account some coincidental facts.

The so-called Magnaura school, founded after Theophilos' death by the kaiser Bardas under Theodora's regency, may have been for instance a response to the "House of Wisdom" or Bayt al-Ḥikma of Baghdad, probably a palace library established by the early Abbasids as a particular bureau. This is not to say that the Byzantine institution copied in any form the Arabic counterpart, for both functioned independently based on their own traditions. For the Abbasids the Sassanid administrative model was a determinant,⁵⁰ whereas the Byzantines relied on the late antique chairs paid for by the state and orientated towards the education of the imperial officers, as we know, for example, in the reign of Theodosios II.⁵¹ What matters is therefore not the conformation of the model itself, but the fact that the Byzantine authorities apparently decided to revive the institutional support of education after they took notice of the achievements of the Abbasid intellectuals at the caliph's court. The school of the Forty Martyrs directed by Leo may have been the first step in this process of Byzantine self-assertion before their eastern neighbours. Since many Melkites, Jacobites and Nestorians played an active part

⁴⁹ Hemmerdinger (1956) and (1971). His theory nonetheless finds echoes again and again in modern literature. See recently Stronk (2010) 135–8 and above Chapter 23. For an overview of Photios' career before his patriarchate see Treadgold (2002) with previous bibliographical references. See also Ronconi (2013), who convincingly denies the existence of Photios' embassy to Baghdad.

⁵⁰ Gutas (1998) 53–60.

⁵¹ Lemerle (1971) 63–4 and Speck (1974b).

in the translation of ancient Greek works into Arabic and were even welcome at the side of the caliphs in Baghdad,⁵² the Byzantine court may have felt a threat to its prestige amongst its fellow Christians in the east, whose conversion rate to Islam significantly increased during the ninth century, as we saw in Chapter 22.

It is also not coincidental that the Byzantine revival began with the study of sciences and philosophy, for which the figure of Leo the Philosopher represents the most influential figure. Understandably enough, scientific texts constituted for the Abbasids the most interesting or, alternatively, the most profitable part of the ancient Greek heritage. Although they were not ignorant of Greek literature and authors like Homer were read, if not used in the polemics between Christians and Muslims (as we saw before), the importance of Greek literature was obviously secondary for Muslim scholars, who had their own poetic tradition in Arabic to rely on. Inversely, however, the focus on science or philosophy instead of on rhetoric or history as a basis for the education of the elites was anything but obvious in Byzantium. In fact, with the reintroduction of icon worship and especially with the appointment of Photios as patriarch in the reign of Michael III, a slow but steady reorientation towards rhetoric training took place that moved Byzantine intellectuals away from the “scientific model” promoted by the iconoclasts.⁵³ The subversive powers of science for the new proclaimed orthodoxy⁵⁴ surely underlay the change to a rhetorical model under Photios, who tried to put some distance between himself and the previous iconoclasm. This process is not unparalleled in contemporary Islam, where the controversial figure of Ma’ mūn (to whom Aristotle is said to have appeared in a dream!⁵⁵) appeared in the later tradition as responsible for the promotion of the heresy of Mu‘ tazila.

Therefore the iconoclasts were branded as “Hellenes” (Ἕλληνες), that is to say, “pagans”, not only for not adhering to “orthodoxy”, but also because they fostered the study of ancient pagan wisdom and did not even shrink from playing with mythological references. Indeed, in the poems of Leo the Philosopher Greek gods appear as a subject matter, a circumstance that moved some of his students to criticize the old master for deviating from the Christian faith. It is doubtful that iconoclast intellectuals of the ninth century went on to question their “Roman” identity during their search for models in pagan Greek writers, but some of their contemporaries apparently thought so because they felt outraged at their close study of the ancients and considered it an offence against the orthodoxy.⁵⁶ The iconoclasts, who were already “Saracen-minded” (σαρακηνόφρονες) in the eyes of the iconophiles, who linked iconoclasm with the aniconism of Islam,⁵⁷ thus also

⁵² Gutas (1998) 136–41.

⁵³ See Signes Codoñer (2002a) 438–48 and Magdalino (2006) 68.

⁵⁴ See Magdalino (2006).

⁵⁵ Gutas (1998) 95–104.

⁵⁶ References in Signes Codoñer (2002a) 429–38.

⁵⁷ See Vasiliev (1956), Crone (1980) and Signes Codoñer (2013c) 137–40 for the decree of Yazīd and its possible impact on Byzantine iconoclasm.

became “Hellenes” by the ninth century because of their approach to the Greek sciences. Taken together, these two degrading epithets diffused by iconophile propaganda and certainly arising out of different circumstances, describe perhaps accurately what the contemporaries might have thought about the cultural stance of the iconoclast elites during Theophilos’ reign.⁵⁸

This suspicious regard toward the blossoming of the sciences among the iconoclasts as being derived from the east is difficult to substantiate in the sources, as already noted. We would like to know more about the imperial ceremonial at the court and consider whether Theophilos paved the way for eastern influences in some way or another. But the only substantial evidence we know is in fact that, after his embassy in Baghdad,

... as soon as John [probably the Grammarian] returned to Theophilos, he recounted everything about Syria and convinced him to construct the palace of Bryas in resemblance (ὁμοίωσιν) to Saracen abodes, in no wise differing from them in its layout (σχῆμα) or decoration (ποικιλία); and this was overseen by him and the work carried out according to John’s description by a man whose name was Patrikes and who was distinguished by the dignity of patrician.⁵⁹

As the identification of the Bryas palace remains disputed and the findings made hitherto provide no sufficient basis for an interpretation,⁶⁰ it is idle to speculate what kind of influence Islamic architecture could have had on it. The purpose of coping with the architectural blossoming of the Abbasids being evident, we cannot however be more precise about the function and particular purpose of the palace and its annexed churches, built not in the political centre of the capital, but in its Asian suburbs.⁶¹

The same reserve applies to the supposed oriental patterns in the layout or function of the new buildings Theophilos made for the imperial palace and described with some detail in the final part of the book devoted to Theophilos by the Continuator.⁶²

⁵⁸ See Signes Codoñer (1996) 157 and 179.

⁵⁹ Th. Cont. III.9 (98.14–21). Ibid. I.10 (21.4–5) it is said that the emperor Theophilos took material for building Bryas from the monastery of Satyros in the Asian suburbs of Constantinople.

⁶⁰ Ricci (1998) argued against the identification of the remains in Küçükyali with the palace, especially because they looked like a cloister, but it cannot be excluded that this could have been a court of a civil structure.

⁶¹ Keshani (2004) argues that the palace was intended to send a message of Byzantine superiority over the Abbasids and targeted mainly the Persian Khurramites serving as allies of the empire.

⁶² Th. Cont. III.41–4 (139.15–148.3). It would be interesting to consider whether the new palace Mu‘taşim built in Sāmarrā, whose layout, contrary to what happens in Baghdad, is more or less known through excavations, may yield some clue for understanding the buildings made by Theophilos in the Imperial Palace. For an overview of the palace rooms

Again problematic is the case of textiles and silks of the period with Sassanid and Islamizing motives, especially hunting scenes, for their dating is anything but sure. Recently Alicia Walker has suggested that textual evidence (mainly the *Liber pontificalis*) seems to point to a surge in the production of textiles during the reign of Theophilos, but her conclusions, however appealing, must be approached with care.⁶³

Especially intriguing is the function of the pentapyrgion, a piece of furniture consisting of five elements endowed with couples or crowned by towers, built by the emperor Theophilos to hold the treasury of the crown and usually displayed in the Magnaura (or alternatively in the Chrysotriklinios).⁶⁴ Long ago André Grabar suggested that the famous *chiesola* of the treasury of Saint Mark, a cruciform container surmounted by five domes (one in the crossing and four at the edges), might have originally been a perfume burner based on the model of an oriental kiosk and added the pentapyrgion of Theophilos as a possible source of inspiration for it.⁶⁵ In a recent detailed study of the *chiesola*, Mabi Angar has further developed the thesis of Grabar, convincingly arguing that the *chiesola* was used as a pot-pourri container and connecting it with the profane sphere of the Komnenian court. She also suggests that the object had as a possible inspiration, not a Byzantine church, but a civil architectural structure, probably a palace. However she also mentions in her study pavilions as a source of inspiration for the *chiesola* without referring to Grabar for this.⁶⁶ Considering the omnipresence of kiosk or pavilion structures in gardens in the Abbasid period, it would be tempting to consider whether the ultimate architectural source of inspiration for this perfume container may be found there, although this would not prove anything about the enigmatic pentapyrgion of Theophilos.

More telling are perhaps some stories about the direct contact Theophilos had with ordinary people when riding through the city on his way to the Blachernai palace. These stories, preserved by the Continuator,⁶⁷ present the emperor as an approachable ruler, worried about the common concerns of his subjects, an image very similar to the prevailing image of Abbasid caliphs such as Ḥārūn al-Rashīd or

(with maps) see Northedge (1993). However, we must avoid overvaluing coincidences, as when we find out through Northedge (1993) 153 that a tower used as a prison in the Jawsaq (kiosk) palace of Sāmarrā was called the “Pearl” (lu’lu’a) exactly as one hall (Μαργαρίτης) built by Theophilos in the palace according to Th. Cont. III.43 (143.18–23). Again, the racecourses discovered at Sāmarrā – see for them Northedge (1990) – have nothing to do with the Hippodrome, but more simply with traditional horse racing amongst the Arabs.

⁶³ Walker (2012) 23–27. For a more detailed report see Brubaker and Haldon (2001) 80–108.

⁶⁴ For the sources and discussion of the function of the pentapyrgion cf. Dagron (2005).

⁶⁵ Grabar (1951) 50–53.

⁶⁶ Angar (2009), especially 150–51 for the references to pavilions.

⁶⁷ See for instance Th. Cont. III.4 (88.4–89.14). More details below in the Epilogue.

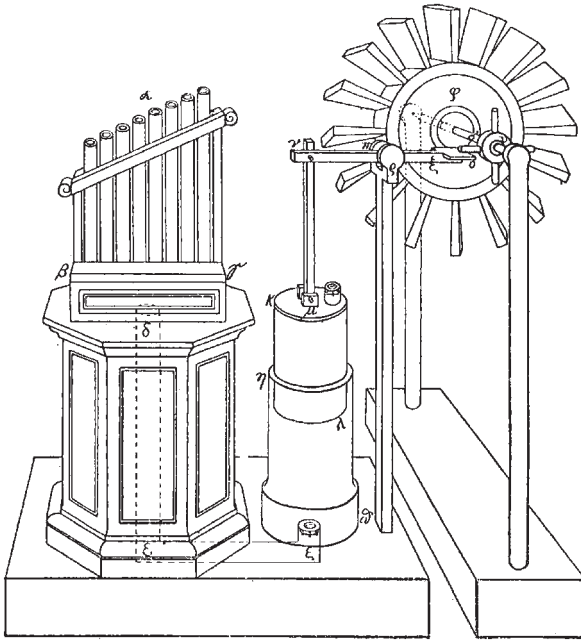


Figure 5 Organ. Heron of Alexandria, *Pneumatica* I.42

Ma'mūn in the tradition preserved in the *Thousand and One Nights*.⁶⁸ The lavish setting for the official receptions of ambassadors might also be related to the aim to surpass the caliph's court. I refer particularly to the automata of lions, birds and griffins along with a golden organ, which were all set in motion or made to play in the presence of foreign ambassadors.⁶⁹ The organ and the automata imply a prerequisite knowledge respectively of the *Pneumatica* and *Automata* of the Hellenistic work of Heron of Alexandria. Chapter 42 at the end of Book I of the *Pneumatica* deals significantly with “construction of an organ” (ὄργάνου κατασκευή) (Figure 5). Some pages later, in Book II, chapter 5, Heron describes how to make metal birds sing with the air expelled from a container through pipes opening at their beaks (see Figure 6).⁷⁰ However, although Heron's texts may have begun to be copied and studied in Byzantium at this time, no manuscripts of his survive dating earlier than the tenth century.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Signes Codoñer (2002a) 426–9.

⁶⁹ Th. Cont. IV.21 (173.6–10) and *De Cer.* II.15 (566.11–570.10).

⁷⁰ The images are taken from the edition of Schmidt (1899a) 205 and 220.

⁷¹ According to Schmidt (1899b) the oldest ms. of Heron's *Mechanica* and *Automata* is Marcianus 516, dating not earlier than the twelfth century. Schöne (1903) lists the mss. of the *Dioptrica*, the oldest being Paris. Supp. Gr. 607 of twelfth or thirteenth century. To the

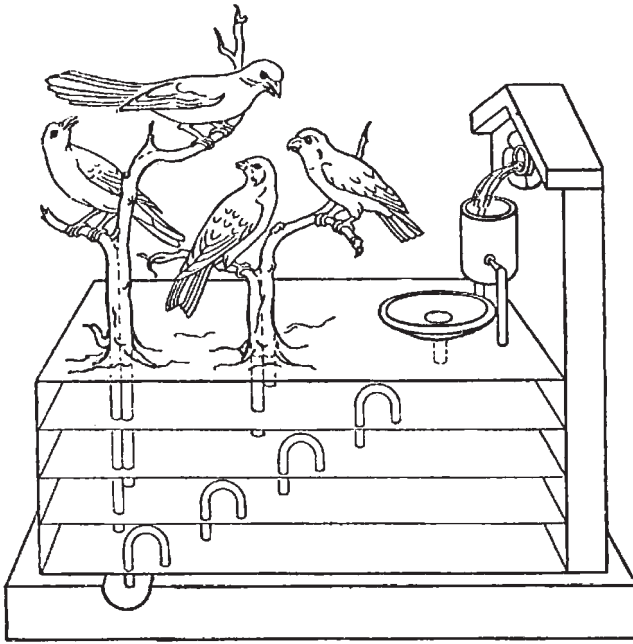


Figure 6 Singing birds. Heron of Alexandria, *Pneumatica* II.5

We know through the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm, written in the tenth century, that Ma'mūn commissioned members of his court to collect scientific manuscripts in Byzantium with the knowledge of the emperor.⁷² Among the persons who supposedly travelled to Byzantium and later worked on the collected works, mention is made of the three Banū Mūsā brothers, who composed, based on Heron of Alexandria and Philon of Byzantium, numerous works and mechanical devices.⁷³ Especially impressive is their so-called *Book of ingenious devices*, composed perhaps c. 859, where they accurately describe the operation of 100 machines of their own which involved subtle combinations of pneumatics and aerostatics. The manuscript tradition of the work is accompanied by illustrations in the manner of the works of Heron. There we frequently find mechanical animals in action, similar to those used in the Great Palace at Constantinople, although

tenth century dates the Seragliensis Gr. 1 of the Topkapi palace according to Pérez Martín (2009) 59–60, who includes reproductions. See also Schöne (1903) VII–XI and Heiberg (1912) XII–XIII.

⁷² *Fihrist* 584.

⁷³ For a thorough study on the work, including translation and reproduction of the original illumination, see Hill (1979). There (p. 21) the models of Heron are listed from which the Banū Mūsā took their inspiration.

they remain in both cases static, in contrast with the developments of later Arabic authors.⁷⁴ Special mention is deserved, however, of the automatic hydraulic flute player constructed by the Banū Mūsā and that Teun Kotsier considers the “earliest known design of a programmable machine”. The author holds that although this work was influenced by his Hellenistic predecessors, “it contains notable advances on the Greek work”. In fact, the Banū Mūsā “ingeniously used small variations in air and water pressure and they used conical valves as automatic regulators”.⁷⁵

As research of this level is unparalleled in Byzantium at the time, it would be tempting to conclude that Theophilus’ devices were inspired by contemporary interest in mechanics at the Abbasid court and especially by its application for ceremonial uses in the palace. In fact, the embassy of Ma’mūn to Byzantium in search of scientific books must have preceded his later campaigns against Theophilus in the very last years of his reign (830–833).⁷⁶ However, although it cannot be coincidence that both courts simultaneously used mechanical devices to impress potential visitors and it is also undeniable that the Arabs made much more progress in the field, one cannot really assert that it was the Byzantines who copied the Abbasids when they placed automata at court. The *Gesta Karoli*, written towards the end of the ninth century, does indeed mention the sending of an organ to Charles the Great by the emperor of Constantinople.⁷⁷ Moreover, the use of organs in imperial ceremonies at Byzantium is attested from the beginning of the eighth century,⁷⁸ so in that case it seems clear that Constantinople provided the pattern for the Abbasids. It could have been the same with the construction of sophisticated automata used at court receptions, although it is equally conceivable that the Abbasids further developed their interest in automata before the Byzantines did the same.

Be this as it may, the point is that there seems to have been a means of communication between Constantinople and Baghdad that ran in both directions and speaks for continuous emulation at both courts. Future research must therefore always keep an eye on Baghdad when considering the intellectual background of the iconoclast emperors.

⁷⁴ Hill (1979) 22–3.

⁷⁵ Koetsier (2001) 589–90, based on Farmer (1931).

⁷⁶ In the *Fihrist* the emperor with whom Ma’mūn corresponded, is identified only as someone the caliph “had sought aid opposing”. Is this to be understood as a reference to the support given by the caliph to Thomas, as we argued in Chapter 13.1.

⁷⁷ Notker Balbulus, *Gesta Karoli* II.6. See also Signes Codoñer (2007c) 194–5.

⁷⁸ See Herrin (1992) 104–5 and Berger (2006) 64–9 with references.

Epilogue

The Image of Theophilos as a Ruler

Based on the analysis in the previous sections of this study we should now be able to form a provisional picture of the emperor as a ruler as he is portrayed through the Byzantine sources, be they contemporary or not. Obviously a more comprehensive study will be needed in order to make a definitive assessment of the historical role played by Theophilos, an assessment based on objective standards, which will take into account other aspects of Theophilos' government excluded from the present analysis (centred in his eastern policy) and will give due relevance to economic and geostrategic factors that are appreciable only in the long term and not in the short run of his sole reign of 12 years and some months. The words that follow must therefore be intended as a preparatory step for this future study without predetermining its conclusions in any form.

As we have seen, despite the serious blow to the empire's prestige caused by the capture and destruction of Amorion by Mu'taṣim in 838, the image of Theophilos as a general and commander was not substantially damaged, perhaps because the practical consequences of this campaign were not so irreparable as the Arab and Greek accounts claimed: indeed the caliph faced a difficult situation during his retreat (Chapter 17.5), which culminated in the usurpation by his nephew 'Abbās, whom the sources portray as negotiating with Theophilos the conditions of a permanent truce (Chapter 18.1). Even after Amorion, Theophilos did not cease to carry out vigorous diplomatic activity to counteract the effects of the military defeat of 838, which included bold military actions in the east (Chapter 18.2–3). The emperor was even able to initiate an understanding with the Rus in 838, when his alliance with the Khazars, which he had carefully fostered since the beginning of his reign, was probably at risk because of the pressure of the caliphate on the Turkish khagan (Chapters 19–20).

Thus the emperor was able to preserve the prestige he had gained in the campaigns against Ma'mūn in 830–833 – where despite occasional setbacks he successfully confronted the mighty Arab troops in Anatolia that were led by the caliph himself, a fact not valued enough in modern research (Chapter 14) – and further developed in his campaigns of 834–837, which culminated in the taking of Sozopetra, an achievement which reverberated in Arab sources and rewarded Theophilos with the second triumph of his reign (Chapters 15–16).

In fact, it is the execution of the 42 martyrs of Amorion that mostly damaged the prestige of Byzantium, as the empire could not prevent leading officials of the imperial army from being slain by the caliph at Sāmarrā. This event, however, took place not during the reign of Theophilos, but during the regency of Theodora

and the minority of Michael III, in the year 845 and by order of the then reigning caliph Wāthiq (842–847). This was a dramatic failure of the Byzantine diplomacy of the restored “orthodoxy”, which could not achieve the release of the high-ranking prisoners at Sāmarrā, contrary to what had happened almost regularly on previous occasions. It is thus understandable that this fact promoted the writing of several hagiographies or “Acts” to the glory of the new martyrs, where Theophilos appears alternatively characterized as a pious emperor or as a furious iconoclast. Certainly, the ultimate causes for this sad event must have been discussed at the time, although we do not get even the slightest glimpse of the debate in these texts, for all the hagiographies are patriotic in their stance and tend to make the Arabs solely responsible for the treacherous murder of the martyrs when they supposedly resisted their conversion to Islam.

It is further significant that after the victory of Amorion no further Abbasid caliph invaded Byzantine territory, the emir of Melitene being for many years the main enemy of the empire and responsible for the attacks into Anatolia. In a certain sense the campaign of 838 was designed to compensate for the inactivity of the caliphate in the face of the aggressive campaigning of the Byzantines in eastern Anatolia between 834 and 837 and to retaliate for previous defeats, but did not pretend to occupy Byzantine territory as had still been the case during the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd. Probably Ma’mūn was the last caliph who ever thought of a permanent occupation of Anatolia. He first tried to oppose Byzantium indirectly by means of the dubious figure of Thomas the Slav, who had the backing of the Abbasids and even admitted Arab troops into his army (Chapter 13). Only after Thomas was defeated did Ma’mūn decide to lead in person his armies into Byzantine territory, although he could not march deep into it as his father had done decades earlier, but had to stop in Cappadocia, where he tried vainly to fortify some strongholds and take them as a base for further expeditions. It can therefore be suspected that in contemporary eyes, after the catastrophic consequences of the civil war between Michael and Thomas, the reign of Theophilos represented a definitive turn in the relations with the caliphate, paving the way for the future expansion to come in the tenth century. The unrest at the eastern frontier during the reigns of Leon V and Michael II (considered in Chapter 2) – a circumstance that probably led to the usurpation of Thomas with the support of the caliph – almost disappeared, significantly, in Theophilos’ reign.

But it is not just to his command of the armies at war but to his leadership of the empire that Theophilos owed his fame. As a ruler the emperor certainly met with some opposition from aristocratic sectors, who regarded with diffidence his approach to the “barbarians” as supporters of his government (Chapter 8). Persians were probably meant by this, for Theophilos made of them one of the most reliable forces in his campaigns in the east, taking advantage of the longstanding opposition of the leaders of the Khurramite movement to the caliphate (Chapters 9–10). Clear evidence of the importance the Khurramites assumed is provided by their rebellion against the emperor after the defeat of Amorion in 838 (Chapter 12). That Theophilos could crush this usurpation without much trouble and dismantle the Khurramite

army speaks also for his having a firm grasp of power despite the crisis provoked by the taking of the dynastic city. Theophobos, who had been made one of the pillars of the eastern policy of the emperor and successively appointed *kaisar* and ruler (*ἐξουσιαστής*) over the Persians (Chapter 11), was thus relegated to obscurity and finally executed without the position of the emperor being apparently at risk at any time. This confirms that the strategy of relying on foreign troops was correctly pursued, for they could have been put aside or replaced in case of danger, as they did not involve other sectors of the government against the reigning emperor.¹ This was in fact the same policy followed by Ma'mūn and Mu'taṣim when they created a new elite of Turkish soldiers, who could act as vanguard in the clashes against the Byzantines (Chapter 17.5). In the long term these units represented a threat to the caliphate because they were given control of the new capital at Sāmarrā. But this evolution was not applicable to Byzantium. Furthermore, as the decision of Theophilos to contact the Rus as mercenaries in the last years of his reign proves, the Byzantines continued to resort to new foreigners to reinforce their land armies, thus avoiding having to rely on a privileged military unit permanently settled in the capital (Chapter 20.1).

The influence of the Armenians at court was probably seen by contemporaries on a different level, for it concerned more the family and commercial links Theophilos needed to exert his power than a conscious policy of promoting Armenians to high posts in the administration regardless of their personal connections. Thus Theophilos appears paradoxically to connect with the figure of Leo the Armenian, as whose avenger he saw himself (Chapter 3) to the extent even of opposing his father's second marriage and dynastic plans of connecting the dynasty with the last Isaurian Constantine VI (Chapter 6). The influential Armenians at court were thus linked with the family of his wife Theodora (Chapter 4) and could not prosper further without the emperor's favour, as is clear from the case of the Manuel the Armenian, perhaps the most prominent figure of Theophilos' reign (Chapter 5). Consequently, it is to the disagreements among the members of this Armenian group that we must turn for the grounds for the usurpation of Alexis Mousele, the only one who could have represented a threat to the imperial ambitions of his father-in-law Theophilos (Chapter 7.2). This does not exclude, however, that the eastern policy of Theophilos could have been determined by the Armenian faction around the emperor, although the evidence for this is scanty, the mere campaigning of Theophilos in Armenian lands in 834–835 not necessarily being explained by his having Armenian advisers (Chapter 15).

Beyond the parties in action at the court or in the army, the image of Theophilos as a ruler is also inextricably bound to his religious policy, a point that has been for its most part deliberately left out of this study. However, beyond the image of

¹ As we have seen, Thomas the Slav is not to be identified with the leader of the *tourmarches* of the *phoideratoi*, Thomas the Armenian, so that the civil war was not triggered by the disaffection of the eastern Anatolian troops of the *federates* against the reigning emperor (Chapter 13.1).

a fierce persecutor of iconophiles which appears repeatedly in the hagiography of the period, and beyond the demonization of John the Grammarian, one of the most prominent intellectuals of the time and Theophilos' loyal supporter, a more pragmatic approach to the issue is possible, one that takes into account that political leaders as well as emperors took decisions not only according to their innermost convictions but also considering the conventions of power. It is with this idea in mind that we considered at the beginning of this study the reestablishment of iconoclasm by Leo the Armenian and its defence in a mild form by his successor Michael the Amorian as the result of a political calculation and not only of religious partisanship. The bad reputation of an emperor like Leo was surely influenced by his iconoclasm, but also determined by other factors of his government that probably led to his assassination by former allies (Chapter 1).

The approach of the Melkites in the Near East to the reigning emperors in Constantinople must also have been ruled by pragmatism. Contrary to the prevailing consensus, there must have been, if not iconoclastic, at least aniconic tendencies in many sectors of the Melkites at least during the eighth and ninth centuries.² Accordingly, Greek iconophile leaders faced increasing difficulties after the council of Nikaia II in 787 to involve their counterparts in the Melkite hierarchy in a clear condemnation of Byzantine iconoclasm, as made evident by the correspondence of Theodore Stoudites.³ It is this circumstance that explains that the so-called *Letter of Theophilos*, a fairly interpolated text with a dossier of passages in favour of icon worship, contains a direct appeal of the three Melkite patriarchs to the emperor to put the territories of the Eastern Church under the control of the empire. This appeal seems possible if the patriarchs were pragmatic enough to put aside religious controversies with Constantinople in order to get its support. Since direct references to icons are absent from the original core of the work, this confirms that the text was manipulated after Theophilos' death in order to present the Melkite prelates as uncompromising defenders of icon worship in front of the last iconoclastic emperor (Chapter 21). Although a Byzantine reconquista of Melkite lands in northern Syria did not take place until the tenth century, this does not mean that expectations of a political change did not exist at the time, and there is some evidence for this in the sources of the period (Chapter 22).

In any case, a pragmatic approach to the issue of the icons may explain that the prestige of Theophilos did not suffer as a result of his official iconoclasm. Certainly, dynastic propaganda put forward by Theodora after the death of her husband may have contributed to promoting a positive image of the emperor to future generations, contrary to what was done with his son and successor Michael III, whom the Macedonian dynasty depicted as a drunkard and debauchee, as he appears especially in the fourth book of *Genesios* and the *Continuator*. But it is to be doubted whether this propaganda alone could have rescued Theophilos from

² Signes Codoñer (2013c)

³ Signes Codoñer (2014).



Figure 7 The London Charioteer silk (detail), perhaps presenting Theophilus as a charioteer. Victoria and Albert Museum T.762–1892; see Muthesius (1997) 58–64. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

discredit if he had not indeed been a popular emperor.⁴ Many of the sources about him and his entourage used by these two historians of the Macedonian period (or by the chronicles of the Logothete group) are not easily reducible to a single work but appear to proceed from a disparate number of texts, if not from oral reports.⁵ Moreover, some stories that figure in the historical sources are hard to reconcile with the official propaganda. Let us consider them now in some detail.

Many stories depict Theophilus in a familial environment, either rebuking his wife (a sainted woman for the orthodox) for making profit through trade despite being an empress; or prohibiting icon worship to his daughters after the youngest one innocently betrays their activities when mentioning to her father the “dolls”

⁴ Markopoulos (1998) concentrates mainly on the rehabilitation process of Theophilus for the Church due to the agency of his widow Theodora, who contributed to spread the story of his conversion to orthodoxy on his deathbed.

⁵ For the oral reports used by our two authors see Signes Codoñer (1995) 643–7.

with which she used to play; or even paying attention to the confidences of a court jester who also reveals to him that Theodora secretly worships icons.⁶ We face here anecdotes that confront us with the human side of the ruler, although, given their naivety, they cannot have originated in official propaganda.

In other cases, the information given appears to be of a more public nature, as when Theophilos appears competing in the hippodrome for his triumph of 837, leading the chariot of the greens and beating his rivals to the enthusiasm of the people who hail him, shouting: *καλῶς ἦλθες, ἀσύγκριτε φακτωνάρη*, “welcome, incomparable charioteer”.⁷ Obviously Theophilos was following here a pattern of his iconoclastic predecessors (especially Constantine V “Kaballinos”)⁸ and showing solidarity with the people gathered at the hippodrome (Figure 7). However, it is the historical fact that remains here, independently of the judgment it deserves. Curiously enough, the role of Theophilos as a charioteer is presented in a neutral way in the *Logothete*, whereas his son Michael III is heavily criticized in the *Continuator* on account of the same inclination.⁹ It appears that it was only later iconophile propaganda that discredited iconoclast emperors for their taking part in the chariot races of the hippodrome.

Apparently also independent of imperial propaganda is the already commented-on story that presents Theophilos forbidding Leo to travel to the caliphate to comply with the caliph’s demand. Instead the emperor, so the story goes, preferred to put Leo at the head of a school in the Church of the Forty Martyrs. The anecdote symbolizes the Byzantine revival of classical scholarship but it would have scarcely been based on an official report, for the indications are too vague and general, devoid of any kind of chronological precision. The cultural activities of Leo become tangible only during the reign of Michael III when the Magnaura school is founded and the different disciplines promoted there are named.¹⁰ In any case, even if official propaganda was behind the story of Leo and the caliph, it tallies well with the evidence of the cultural revival that emerges from the sources of the period summarily considered above (Chapter 23.2). In fact, the official reports transmitted by the *Continuator* about the edifications of Theophilos, mainly at the imperial palace of Constantinople,¹¹ are unparalleled in the ninth century before the Macedonian dynasty, and speak strongly for an emperor devoted to promoting the imperial glory through his buildings, as was also the case with Justinian.

But the most important stories connected with Theophilos are those that depict him as a righteous and just emperor. Certainly, we cannot discount the official propaganda at work behind some of the stories, but the sources are so disparate

⁶ Th. Cont. III.4–6 (88.4–92.17). See Signes Codoñer (1995) 373–91.

⁷ Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 24 (223.162–166).

⁸ Rochow (1994) 9, 136 and 142.

⁹ Th. Cont. IV.36 (198.3–199.7)

¹⁰ An overview of Leo’s biography in *PmbZ* #4440.

¹¹ Th. Cont. III.8, 41–44 (94.19–95.18, 139.15–148.3).

and come from such different types of texts that in the end one cannot avoid the impression that this image of the emperor, albeit officially promoted, made a deep impression on contemporaries and was thus transmitted to posterity.¹²

Especially revealing is the case of the short treatise entitled “About the good deeds of emperor Theophilus” (*Περὶ τῶν ἀγαθοεργιῶν Θεοφίλου βασιλέως*, edited by Regel as *De Theophili imperatoris benefactis*). At its beginning the text briefly praises Theophilus for repairing the walls of the city as well as the monasteries outside the walls and the church of the Blachernai, exposed to pillaging by enemies. But immediately after, the text presents Theophilus as a κριτῆς δίκαιος καὶ ἄριστος, “best and just judge”, and reports two stories that prove the point and make up the rest of the text. In the first one a praepositus is burnt alive in the hippodrome for seizing a ship that was the property of a widow; Theophilus also punishes the quaestor with lashes, *decalvatio* and banishment for being slow in implementing the law.¹³ In the following, longer story the abuses of two magistroi against an adjoining nunnery whose property they covet are minutely described. The oikonomos and the nuns denounce them before the emperor, who calls for a trial and threatens the magistroi with decapitation. Out of fear of the emperor’s justice, the magistroi then come to a private agreement before the trial. When the trial meets at the Magnaura the emperor, after summoning the oikonomos, who had not appeared, verifies the agreement of the parties and lets them go, forgiving the magistroi.¹⁴ A concluding paragraph emphasizes again the sense of justice of the δικαιοκρίτης πάνυ, “most just judge”, and states that wrongdoing disappeared from the empire during his reign.¹⁵

This short pamphlet is written in a very plain, popular language, with a simple syntax that deviates from the use of classical grammar (mostly in the rection of the verbs). It contains just two stories preceded by a preamble and followed by a conclusion, too little material for an official panegyric. Moreover, the details provided are too concrete for an invention, as for example when the droungarios sends his mandatores to look for the oikonomos and the nuns and finds them at the market (ἐν τῷ φόρῳ) purchasing a dish and glass set of silver (δισκοποτήρια ἄργυρᾶ) and some books for the nunnery. Finally, if the text derived somewhat from official propaganda, the emperor would have never been said to follow the “heresy of his father” (τῆς πατρικῆς αἰρέσεως).¹⁶ The popular flavour of this short piece points rather to a popular source, even an oral report, not dissimilar to the stories preserved in the so-called *Patria* of Constantinople.¹⁷

¹² As is well known, Theophilus appears as a judge in the Hades in the *Timarion*, a satirical dialogue of the twelfth century edited by Romano (1974). Further details in Diehl (1931). The best overview of Theophilus’ justice is Gkoutzioukostas (2004) 56–7 and 60–65.

¹³ *De Theophili benefactis* 40.17–26.

¹⁴ *De Theophili benefactis* 40.26–43.5.

¹⁵ *De Theophili benefactis* 43.6–19.

¹⁶ *De Theophili benefactis* 40.3–4.

¹⁷ See Preger (1901), Cameron and Herrin (1984) and Berger (1988) (2013).

But there is much more than that, for many other stories reporting Theophilos' strict sense of justice are scattered among very heterogeneous sources. Let us now review the evidence.

The first act of Theophilos' reign, the public punishment of the killers of Leo V, was made to symbolize the theme of justice presiding over the new reign (Chapter 3.3). This measure was in fact a risky step, for Theophilos' father, the source of the legitimacy of his power, was among the conspirators who profited from Leo's death. The emperor is further shown displaying justice on the street, when, on the occasion of his riding through the streets of Constantinople, he answers the spontaneous petitions of the citizens meeting him. Thus he gives back to a widow the horse he is mounted on as soon as he is informed by her that the animal belonged to her deceased husband from whom it was taken by an unscrupulous general who in turn gave it as a present to the emperor as if from himself. The general, perhaps no lesser than the *comes* of the Opsikion thema, is punished and beaten, and the widow and his sons rewarded for the damage.¹⁸ In another story it is Petronas, the brother of his wife Theodora, who is now subjected to severe blows by Theophilos because he put up a building in front of the house of a widow leaving her without natural light, thus contravening Roman law.¹⁹ Furthermore, the emperor does not shrink from setting fire to the ship of his own wife Theodora when he is informed that she was making a profit by selling its cargo. By doing so, Theophilos protested in front of his attendants, saying: "Who has ever seen an emperor of the Romans or his wife as merchant?"²⁰

Again, these stories, taken from historical sources, do not fit with what one would expect from official propaganda. They have a popular flavour, if not a hagiographical tone. No wonder then that we find similar tales in the *Lives* of saints of the period. This is the case, for example, of the *Life of Peter of Atroa*, written by his disciple Sabas shortly after 843 and, accordingly, based on fresh memories of a well-known thaumaturge of the age who died in 837.²¹ One of the acquaintances of Peter of Atroa is a consul, whose family he helped on several occasions, for instance delivering successively his wife and a nephew from a demonic possession during the reign of Michael and the usurpation of Thomas.²² Later, under Theophilos,²³ this same consul is falsely accused of conspiracy

¹⁸ Th. Cont. III.7 (92.17–94.18). In Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 31 (225.204–226.224), where the petitioner himself is the owner of the horse and the *comes* finally dies in the war after fleeing in combat as a coward.

¹⁹ Log. (A) *Theophilos* [130] 10 (218.51–219.66). For dispositions concerning distances between buildings see *Codex* 8.10.12, later copied in *Prochiron* 38.4–6, 8 and *Eisagoge* 39.2–5.

²⁰ Th. Cont. III.4 (88.10–89.14).

²¹ For Sabas see *PmbZ*#6447 and *PBE* s.v. "Sabas 1". For this *Life* see also Efthymiadis (2006) 160–81.

²² Sabas, *Life of Peter of Atroa* (1) §§34–6.

²³ Perhaps in the fourth year of his reign, as is stated in Sabas, *Life of Peter of Atroa* (1) §62.

against the emperor (τὸν αὐτὸν ὑπατικὸν ὑπὸ τινῶν συκοφαντηθέντα τῷ βασιλεῖ Θεοφίλῳ διαβληθῆναι ὡς ἐκείνῳ ἐπιβουλευόντα) and takes flight. Whilst in hiding he is visited by a perfidious relative (called simply γαμβρός in the *Life*) who tries to convince him to give himself up to the emperor, while in fact he was secretly corresponding with Theophilus and arranging the handover of the supposed conspirator. Thus the relative succeeds in detaining the consul in a monastery before handing him over to the emperor. The saint, on hearing of this, hurries to the monastery where he finds the consul cowering and fearing for his life. He then prophesies that the emperor will not execute the consul but just punish him with a fine. Turning then to the traitor, Peter also proclaims that God will duly reward him for his acts. In fact, Theophilus does spare the consul's life, just imposing a financial penalty (χρημάτων μόνον ὑπήνεγκεν ζημίαν), whereas "the tortuous-minded relative who accompanied the consul was subjected to a not low number of blows by the emperor" (αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ τοῦτω σκολιοφρόνως συμπορευσάμενος γαμβρὸς αὐτοῦ οὐ ταῖς τυχοῦσαις μάστιξιν παρὰ τοῦ βασιλέως καθυπεβλήθη).²⁴

It is not only Theophilus' clemency (a virtue praised in many emperors) in pardoning the consul, but his deep sense of justice in punishing the relative for his betrayal that must be highlighted in this story. Theophilus seems to follow the old maxim "Rome does not pay traitors" in punishing the treacherous relative, despite the fact that he only handed a conspirator over to the emperor.²⁵ It appears to be the same line of conduct that led Theophilus to punish the murderers of Leo the Armenian at the very beginning of his reign, although they were the same persons who put his father Michael on the throne and were thus responsible for the establishing of the Amorian dynasty (Chapter 3.3). But now the source that tells this story is an iconophile *Life* written by the monk Sabas, who not only witnessed most of the events he reports in his work, but even appears to have personally known the unnamed consul (this being perhaps a reason for silencing his name), whose words he reproduces more than once in direct speech, as if telling Sabas in person what actually happened to him.

A very similar history appears in another iconophile hagiography, the *Life of Antonios the Younger*, written many years after the death of the saint in 865 by an eyewitness to his later deeds. The saint, called John before he took the monastic orders with the name of Antonios, assumed the representation (ἐκ προσώπου) of the strategos of the Kibyrrhaiotai at Attaleia during the war between Michael and Thomas. During this period he combated fiercely the partisans of the rebel (labelled as apostate by the author of the *Life*), to the point of their complete annihilation (εἰς ἀφανισμόν πεποιήκε).²⁶ Under Theophilus, some former partisans of Thomas came to the court to denounce the abuses of John when he was ἐκ προσώπου at Attaleia (he had taken orders in the meantime), for they had suffered injustice

²⁴ Sabas, *Life of Peter of Atroa* (1) §64.

²⁵ Based on the betrayal and assassination of the Lusitanian rebel Viriatus by men of his entourage, as told in Eutropius' *Breviarium* 4.16.

²⁶ *Life of Antonios the Younger* §§10–12.

at his hands and been deprived of their money and goods (ὡς ἀδικηθῆντες ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ τῶν ἰδίων ἀποστερηθῆντες χρημάτων τε καὶ κτημάτων). Theophilos, again, instead of ignoring their claims – for as we have seen Thomas had been the enemy of his father and received the support of the caliph in his attempt to seize the imperial throne – “after making an inquiry and being informed ... (πυθόμενος δὲ καὶ μαθὼν) orderered his attendants to give back their rights to the persons who had suffered injustice at his cause” (ἐκήλευσε τοὺς διαφύροντας αὐτῷ ἀποδοῦναι τοῖς δῆθεν ἀδικηθεῖσι τὰ ἴδια). Furthermore, he ordered John to be brought before him for justice. When John finally appears before Theophilos, he claims to have done nothing other than to prosecute Thomas’ partisans “as being enemies of the empire of your father and combatants of the Christians” (ὡς ἐχθροὺς τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ πατρός σου καὶ πολεμίους τῶν χριστιανῶν) when he confiscated his properties and handed them over to the soldiers of the empire.²⁷

As we see, the issue at stake was one of ordinary justice and concerned the final destination of the goods and properties confiscated from some subjects of the empire during the difficult times of the so-called civil war. One cannot avoid the impression that some excesses were made during John’s tenure of office that went far beyond his duties as representative of the imperial administration in Attaleia. As a matter of fact, Theophilos found John guilty of the charges, for he handed him to the officer “in charge of petitions” (ἐπὶ τῶν δεήσεων) Stephen, who in turn put him in prison.²⁸

However, things did not end here, for Stephen apparently tried to get money from the prisoner in order to release him and subjected the saint to severe blows without, alas, any positive result. When Theophilos heard about all this, he released the mistreated prisoner on the spot and punished the corrupt servant with blows, confiscation of his property and banishment from the city.²⁹ The justice of the emperor is made again more remarkable by the fact that it is described by an iconophile author writing many decades after his death.

Certainly there are also many hagiographic sources heaping insults on Theophilos but it is always because of his persecution of icon worshippers.³⁰ The same insults appear again directed against Leo the Armenian, who is unanimously depicted as a rude and savage ruler by historical and hagiographical sources.³¹ But in his case, positive evidence as a ruler is hard to find except for a brief statement about him made by the patriarch Nikephoros (Chapter 1.2). And, most important for our case here, Genesios and the Continuator devote a whole chapter to the harsh penalties imposed by Leo on his subjects, including frequent mutilation.³²

²⁷ *Life of Antonios the Younger* §31.

²⁸ *Life of Antonios the Younger* §32.

²⁹ *Life of Antonios the Younger* §§32–3.

³⁰ Markopoulos (1998) 41.

³¹ See Signes Codoñer (1991), (1994) for the degrading epithets given to Leo in the iconophile sources of the period, especially in iconophile hagiographies.

³² Gen. I.15 (13.83–91) and Th. Cont. I. 14 (25.20–26.8). See Signes Codoñer (1995) 117–20.

This makes a strong contrast with Theophilos. However, Leo also tried to cultivate an image of a just emperor, as suggested by a story told again by Genesisios and the Continuator that remains fairly unusual among hundreds of passages written to discredit him. The version as rendered by the Continuator can be translated as follows:

He wished to be called a lover of justice (δικαιοσύνης έραστής λέγεσθαι έβούλετο), though he was not one; nevertheless, he sought after this and, sitting in the Lausiakos, he delivered many judgements by himself. Once someone brought before him a charge concerning the theft of a wife, to wit that a certain notable person had unjustly stolen this person's wife and that "Despite many attempts I have not even been allowed to speak to the Praefect." And when the Praefect, who presented himself forthwith, avowed that the case was thus, Leo brought him to account, dismissing him from his office and venting great anger upon him; and he commanded that the adulterer should be handed over to the law.³³

Was Theophilos' love for justice modelled on the image of his predecessor? We have already argued in Chapter 3 that there was some continuity between both reigns despite the fact that Leo was murdered by the accomplices of Theophilos' father Michael. Certainly, love for justice is too frequent a cliché for emperors to consider it distinctive of a given reign. However, the fact that both emperors are presented in their function of ordinary judges facing concrete demands of particular citizens is far from common at that time. Moreover, the Continuator applies to Theophilos almost the same words he uses for Leo when he states that right from the beginning of his reign Theophilos "wanted to be known as a fervent lover of justice and rigorous guardian of the laws of the state" (τῆς δικαιοσύνης ὥσπερ ἔμπυρος έραστής καλεῖσθαι βουλόμενος καὶ νόμων εἶναι φύλαξ πολιτικῶν ἀκριβῆς).³⁴ This is of course for the Continuator just an excuse put forward by Theophilos to punish the former conspirators against Leo and thus prevent new uprisings in the palace. But the coincidence with Leo's image remains.

It would be to push the evidence too far to speak of a common political program of the emperors of the second iconoclasm on this scant basis alone. But we can perhaps reasonably conclude that Theophilos' aim of justice was displayed beyond the usual standards of his immediate predecessors until it became almost proverbial in later times. What may have contributed to this was his accessibility to his subjects when riding through the city as well as his punishment of the mighty and powerful, whoever they might be, including friends and family and even close

³³ Th. Cont. I.30 (30.19–31.6). Gen. I.16 (14.16–33) has the same story with minor variants.

³⁴ Th. Cont. III.1 (85.1–2). This reference to Theophilos' aim of justice is lacking in the corresponding passage of Genesisios. This author too refers only in passing to the righteousness of the decisions taken by Leo in Gen. I.16 (14.16, by means of the adverb δικάτως).

supporters of the Amorian dynasty. We have also seen how he knew to be merciful even with conspirators, as in the case of the (falsely?) accused consul of the *Life of Antonios the Younger*. But this was not a single case: Manuel the Armenian, after a long exile among the Arabs, returned to the emperor's favour (he even acted as godfather to one of Theophilos' children) and became his right-hand man during most of his reign (Chapter 5); His son-in-law Alexios Mousele was never punished in spite of the repeated (perhaps not wholly unfounded) accusations directed against him of pretending to the throne (Chapter 7.2); Theophobos, also part of the imperial family, continued to enjoy some support from the emperor after the failed rebellion of the Persians in 838, and was only executed under obscure circumstances when the emperor was approaching death (Chapter 12.2).

Oriental sources confirm that Theophilos' fame as a righteous emperor had nothing to do with official propaganda, for they have preserved two further stories, unknown to Greek authors, which clearly speak for the emperor's sense of justice. The first one has to do with the plundering of Sozopetra and has been transmitted by the Arab historian Ya'qūbī, who states that after the defeat of Amorian Theophilos sent ambassadors to Mu'taṣim promising to "deliver the men who committed atrocities at Zibaṭra because of the wrongdoing of the patricians". As we already saw in Chapter 17.4 this was not necessarily a message of humiliation on the part of Theophilos, who could have learnt of the carnage made in Sozopetra by the Khurramites and considered that appropriate punishment of the wrongdoers could facilitate an agreement with the caliph.³⁵

Even more telling is an episode reported by Ṭabarī that took place after the defeat of the emperor at Anzes in 838. When Theophilos retreated to the position of the main army he had previously left in the rear at the Halys river, he found that most of the soldiers had deserted in the meantime on hearing of the defeat of the emperor's contingent. The commander of the troops, although a relative of the emperor himself, was deemed responsible by the emperor for the flight of the soldiers and executed on the spot.³⁶ By this exemplary measure Theophilos probably avoided being accused of partiality before a member of his family who held a high post. As the Continuator and Genesios tell us (and we saw in Chapter 17.2), Theophilos was consequently able to pardon the rest of the officers despite their cowardice, after they confessed their faults amidst tears, for he needed their help to continue facing the Arab invaders.³⁷

³⁵ Mich. Syr. 536, trans. Chabot (1899–1910) vol. 3, 95–6 says that Theophilos repented for the plundering of Sozopetra and confessed his offence to the caliph in a letter.

³⁶ Ṭabarī III.1243, trans. Bosworth (1991) 106.

³⁷ Th. Cont. III.32 (128.22–129.7) and Gen. III.14 (48.60–49.66).

A Chronology of Theophilos' Reign

The following chronological table may prove useful as a guide for the reader, who, in order to trace the sequence of events in the present book, is obliged to skip pages and jump back and forth through the different chapters, for we have adopted a thematic arrangement in our exposition. However, and without obviously denying the practical side of the present chronology, I would like to stress here that the chronological ordering of the events is not just a routine corollary of the previous discussion, useful for the political history or even customary in works of this kind, but that it is the *conditio sine qua non* for understanding historical processes. As a matter of fact, causes and consequences of given events afford us the main clues as to their interpretation. And these causes and consequences cannot be obtained without establishing a proper chronological order. Therefore the frequently tedious discussion of chronology, which the present work may not have escaped, is a necessary step for a correct assessment of the events under discussion. It can be said without any exaggeration that the present chronological table, if proved to be correct, can be considered one of the major results of our research, for it will allow future scholars to reassess the historical processes under review.

It must also be said that in order to establish this chronological table a careful and detailed analysis of the sources was needed, whereby not only the bare facts or eventually their intrinsic likelihood was taken into account, but also the structure of the texts and the process of the construction of narratives by their authors. As a consequence, we detected that the absolute or relative dates given by the historians of the period must often be reconsidered, for they were the result of deductive thinking by these authors, who did their best to order the events according to criteria we cannot always ascertain, but which are not necessarily correct.

So, for example, the chronology of the campaigns of Ma'mūn as given by Ṭabarī was corrected after being contrasted with the Greek sources (Chapter 14.1–3). We ruled out as well the existence of a campaign of the Melitians in 835 mentioned by Michael the Syrian, for it was a clear case of a misplaced or misdated excerpt creating a duplicate (Chapter 15.5). The same was the case with the duplicate Michael made of the campaign against Sozopetra in 837 (Chapter 16.1). The exile of Manuel (Chapter 5.3, 5.5), the campaign at Charsianon of Theophilos (Chapter 14.2) and the embassy of Petronas Kamateros to the Khazars (Chapter 19.1) were also not dated according to the order randomly given them by Genesios and the Continuator (who tried to construct a coherent narrative out of disparate sources without any dating), but to a more adequate understanding of the sequence of the events, which was gained through a cross-referencing and detailed comparison of the sources.

In other difficult cases we were able to ascertain that the historians not only put the events in the wrong place, but also misinterpreted them and “corrected” secondary details of the story which rendered an accurate assessment more difficult. Thus, when they confused Theophilos’ mother with his stepmother they dated his marriage to 829 instead of 821 (Chapter 4.1); and when they identified Thomas the Armenian with Thomas the Slav they were not able to unify the different chronologies of these two persons (Chapter 13.1).

Curiously enough, whereas many modern scholars tend to accept uncritically the chronology of Byzantine, Arab and Syrian authors, which must indeed be approached with utmost caution in this respect (as I think to have shown), they frequently neglect stories told in these same sources, rejecting them *in toto* as legendary or fantastical. This is sometimes done for no other reason than that the stories did not tally well with the scholars’ previous rationalist reconstruction of the events. Often, no explanation is even given for the concoction of what these scholars considered forgeries or fantasies with no historical basis, as if medieval historians were fond of inventing stories without motive or borrowing them without any questioning from undefined narrative sources.

On the contrary, I think that we must mistrust chronological references that are not secured by the agreement of several sources, yet we must always look for plausible grounds for the concoction of any single story before rejecting it as “unhistorical.” It appears advisable to question dating and chronological sequences provided by medieval historians, for it is part of the human condition to err from time to time when trying to put in order events of the past, whereas there are evident risks in applying strict rationalist thought when judging the historical value of given stories, for many of them are conveyed to us through literary forms and thus distorted and embellished for the use of contemporary readers, who, most probably, perfectly knew the codes employed. Before rejecting these stories as absurd or incoherent, we must look for the codes in order to find out, if possible, the history behind them, or to put it otherwise, the historical event that prompted them. It is therefore risky to discard a story simply because we are not able to trace the motivations of the persons who created it. As a consequence, to rely on form and structures and be diffident about content would not only be methodologically unsound, but, in fact, the opposite of the correct procedure followed by a medieval historian. It would also be evidence of the low regard in which many Byzantine authors are usually held.

It is by following this elementary approach that we were able to reinterpret in the present book some stories transmitted by the sources and rejected by the communis opinio until now as lacking any historical basis. Therefore we could, for instance, find in the oral epic tradition of the time a convenient explanation for the description of the activities of Manuel the Armenian during his exile (Chapter 5.4). We also established that the raising of Theophobos as a little child in the imperial palace was not the fancy product of a monkish hagiography, but accurately reflected what actually happened, thus making impossible the identification of Theophobos with the Khurramite leader Naşr, who may however have been his father (Chapter

11.2). We were also able to accept the version of the long stay of Thomas the Slav among the Arabs, usually rejected as a legendary account, for it provided the best explanation for the backing of his revolt by the caliph Ma'mūn (Chapter 13.1). Again, we detected several layers in the composition of the *Letter to Theophilos* written by the three Melkite patriarchs that provided an explanation, however provisory, for a text usually approached with diffidence by scholars and which cannot be used anymore as definitive evidence of the unanimous iconophile stance of the Oriental Church at the time (Chapter 21). Finally, we collected scattered evidence from among many sources, which unanimously presented Theophilos as a righteous and just emperor and contradicted the view that this image was merely constructed by official propaganda put out by his widow Theodora after 842 (Epilogue). It goes without saying that all these conclusions directly affect the chronology of the events considered, as is reflected in the following table.

The following chronology is to a great extent hypothetical and based on the conclusions made in the corresponding chapter of the book. I have put in brackets at the end of every questionable reference the number of the chapter where I dealt with the issue. I would suggest that the reader check my argumentation first before accepting the dates proposed in the table. A useful alternative chronology of Theophilos' reign is provided by Vasiliev (1950) 438–440.

800–803 (c.): Birth of Theophilos. Leo the Armenian acts as his godfather. Both Leo and Theophilos' father Michael of Amorion serve as soldiers under Bardanes the Turk (Chapter 3.1).

803 (19 July): Bardanes the Turk, an Armenian strategos, rises up in arms against emperor Nikephoros. The rebellion will end some weeks later with Bardanes tonsured and retired to a monastery on the island of Prote (Chapter 3.1).

808 (February): A conspiracy against Nikephoros led by the quaestor and patrikios Arsaber is suppressed by the emperor. Leo the Armenian, who must have married Arsaber's daughter Theodosia before (Chapter 3.1), is banished from Constantinople.

811 (26 July): Death of the emperor Nikephoros I on the battlefield during his campaign against the Bulgarians. His son Staurakios is proclaimed emperor.

812 (11 January): Death of the emperor Staraukios, Nikephoros' son, as a consequence of his wounds. Michael I Rhangabe is proclaimed emperor. Leo the Armenian is recalled from his exile and appointed strategos of the Anatolikoi (Chapter 3.1).

813 (12 July): Leo the Armenian is crowned emperor by patriarch Nikephoros after the resignation of Michael I. Manuel the Armenian is appointed strategos of the Armeniakoi (Chapter 5.2).

815 (13 March): Patriarch Nikephoros is deposed by Leo V. Beginning of the second iconoclast period.

- 819 (Spring): Manuel the Armenian is contacted by the rebel Naṣr of Jazīra, shortly before caliph Ma'mūn makes his entry into Baghdad (August) (Chapter 5.2).
- 819 (Summer): Thomas the Slav contacts Ma'mūn in Baghdad and receives his support in invading the Byzantine Empire (Chapter 13.1).
- 820 (Spring/Summer): Thomas the Slav invades Anatolia with the assistance of Muslim troops and the peoples of the Caucasus (Chapters 2.3 and 13).
- 820 (25 December): Leo V is killed at the palace by a group of conspirers, among whom there were former partisans of his. Michael of Amorion is crowned emperor (Chapter 3.2).
- 821 (12 May): Theophilos is crowned co-emperor with his father Michael. Theophilos' marriage with Theodora is probably celebrated the same day (Chapter 4.1).
- 821 (end)–823 (beginning): Siege of Constantinople by Thomas' troops.
- 821–824: Manuel the Armenian goes into exile (Chapter 5.3, 5.5).
- 822 (Spring): Thekla, Theophilos' eldest daughter, is born. She is named after Theophilos' mother (Chapter 4.1).
- 822–823 (c.): Occupation of Crete by Andalusians (Chapter 13.3).
- 823 (Autumn): Thomas the Slav is taken prisoner at Arkadiopolis and executed.
- 824 (c.): Thekla, the first wife of Michael II, dies. Michael II marries Euphrosyne, daughter of Constantine VI (Chapter 6.1).
- 824 (c.): Birth of Theophilos' first son, who is called Constantine after Constantine VI, the father of Theophilos' stepmother (Chapter 7.1).
- 825–826 (c.): Maria, the youngest of Theophilos' daughters, is born (Chapter 7.2).
- 826–827: Euphemios rebels in Sicily against Michael II.
- 829 (2 October): Michael dies of kidney failure and Theophilos becomes sole emperor.
- 829 (Autumn): Theophilos crowns his son Constantine co-emperor (Chapter 7.1). Euphrosyne, Theophilos' stepmother, is banished from the palace (Chapter 6). The murderers of Leo V are punished (Chapter 3.3).
- 829–830: John (the Grammarian?) is sent to Baghdad in an embassy. There he contacts Manuel the Armenian, the empress Theodora's uncle, who was exiled among the Abbasids (Chapter 5.4).
- 830 (Summer): First campaign of Ma'mūn in south Cappadocia, where he takes Koron. A second army, led by 'Abbās, Ma'mūn's son, enters the Byzantine frontier probably crossing the Antitaurus range through the passes of Adata or Melitene (Chapter 15.1). Manuel the Armenian betrays 'Abbās and comes back to the Byzantines. He is forgiven by the emperor.
- 831 (c.): Embassy of Petronas Kamateros to the Khazars for building the fortress of Sarkel (Chapter 19.1–2).

831 (Autumn?): Constantine, Theophilos' son and co-emperor, dies (Chapter 7.1).

831 (September): The emperor defeats Muslim troops from Tarsos, Mopsuestia, Adana, Eirenoupolis and Anazarba. Triumph of Theophilos in Constantinople (Chapter 14.2). A kaisar, most probably Theophobos, takes part in the triumph (Chapters 7.2 and 11.3).

831 (September) to 832 (Spring): Fortification of Loulon near the Cilician Gates (Chapter 14.4).

832 (21 April): John the Grammarian appointed patriarch? (Chapters 21.3 and 24.1).

832 (Spring/Summer): Second campaign of Ma'mūn in south Cappadocia against Tyana, Herakleia and the Maṭāmīr. Again his son 'Abbās accompanies him. Theophilos may have been either defeated by 'Abbās or put to flight before joining the battle (Chapter 14.3).

832–833: Betrothal of Maria, Theophilos' daughter, to Alexios Mousele (Chapter 7.2).

833 (Spring/Summer): Third campaign of Ma'mūn in south Cappadocia. Upon his return the caliph dies unexpectedly and Mu'taṣim comes to power (Chapter 14.7).

833 (November–December): Start of the final campaign of Mu'taṣim against the Khurramites (Chapter 10.1).

834 (Beginning): Khurramites are enrolled in the Byzantine army (Chapter 10.1). Their leader Naṣr is appointed tourmarches of the phoideratoi (Chapter 10.2). His son Theophobos is appointed exousiastes of the Persians (Chapter 11.4).

834 (Spring/Summer): The Khurramites campaign in the region of Basean, perhaps as allies of Bagarat Bagratuni (Chapter 15.1–4).

835 (Spring/Summer): Campaign of Theophilos in western Armenia, in the regions of Sper and Theodosiopolis (Chapter 15.1–4).

836 (Spring/Summer): An imperial army under the command of Theophobos and Bardas enters the Georgian principalities to help the curopalates Bagarat Bagratuni and his allied Abasgians in their fight against the Muslim emir of Tiflis, Iṣḥāq ibn Ismā'īl. The emir of Tiflis defeats them in the region of Vanand, probably in September (Chapter 15.1–4).

836: The three Melkite patriarchs of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem write a letter to Theophilos praising him for his recent victories and requesting his military intervention in the area in order to reunite again Christian lands (Chapter 21).

837–838: Marriage of Maria, Theophilos' youngest daughter, to Alexios Mousele, who is then appointed kaisar (Chapter 7.2).

837 (Spring/Summer): Theophilos enters Syria, takes Sozopetra and Arsamosata and besieges Melitene. A triumph is held in Constantinople (Chapter 16). A kaisar, probably Alexios Mousele, takes part in the triumph (Chapter 7.2).

- 838: Stay of Alexios Mousele in Sicily as dux (Chapter 7.2).
- 838 (21 April): John the Grammarian appointed patriarch (Chapters 21.3 and 24.1).
- 838 (Spring/Summer): Envoys of the khagan of the Rus arrive in Constantinople probably by the Dnieper route (Chapter 20.1).
- 838 (Early Summer): Campaign of the caliph Mu‘taṣim in Anatolia. Defeat of Theophilos at Anzes, capture of Ankyra and, on 12 August, of Amorion (Chapter 17).
- 838 (Late Summer): Conspiracy in Constantinople against the emperor (Chapter 7.2). Uprising of the Persians and proclamation of Theophobos as emperor (Chapter 12).
- 838 (Late Summer): Conspiracy of Abbās against Mu‘taṣim with the understanding of emperor Theophilos (Chapter 18.1).
- 838: The Khazars strike for the first time dirhams bearing the name of the mint (Arḍ al-Khazar, “Land of the Khazars”) the Turkish tamgha, and an invocation to Moses (Chapter 20.2).
- 838: Theophilos sends the ambassador Karteros to Cordoba, to the court of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (Chapter 18.2).
- 839 (18 May) The emperor Louis the Pious receives at Ingelheim an embassy of the Byzantines which was accompanied by some emissaries of the khagan of the Rus (Chapter 20.1).
- 839 (c.): Abū Sa‘īd leads an expedition into Byzantine territory departing from Cilicia and with the help of the people of Mopsuestia under the command of general Bashīr. Two encounters with the Khurramite leader Naṣr, who is defeated and killed (Chapter 18.3).
- 839: ‘Abd al-Raḥmān sends the ambassador Ghazāl to Constantinople, to the court of Theophilos (Chapter 18.2).
- 840: Theodosios Baboutzikos is sent by Theophilos to Venice to prepare a naval offensive against the Arabs (Chapter 18.2).
- 840 (c.): Naval expedition of Theoktistos in Abasgia? (Chapter 17.2).
- 840 (c.): The Byzantine navy attacks the port of Antioch (Chapter 18.3).
- 842 (10 January): Death of Theophilos.

Abbreviations

<i>AASS</i>	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i>
<i>AB</i>	<i>Analecta Bollandiana</i>
<i>BBA</i>	<i>Berliner Byzantinische Arbeiten</i>
<i>BBOM</i>	<i>Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>Byzantion</i>
<i>BF</i>	<i>Byzantinische Forschungen</i>
<i>BGA</i>	<i>Bibliotheca geographorum arabicorum</i>
<i>BMGS</i>	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i>
<i>BSI</i>	<i>Byzantinoslavica</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>CFHB</i>	<i>Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae</i>
<i>CSCO</i>	<i>Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium</i>
<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
<i>EI</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Islam</i>
<i>FBRG</i>	<i>Forschungen zur byzantinischen Rechtsgeschichte</i>
<i>FM</i>	<i>Fontes Minores</i>
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>ILO</i>	<i>Institut de Lettres Orientales</i>
<i>JÖB</i>	<i>Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik</i>
<i>LbGr</i>	<i>Lexikon zur byzantinischen Gräzität</i>
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
<i>OCA</i>	<i>Orientalia Christiana Analecta</i>
<i>OCP</i>	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
<i>PBE</i>	<i>Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire I: (641-867)</i>
<i>PLRE</i>	<i>Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, 3 vols., Cambridge 1971-1992</i>
<i>PmbZ</i>	<i>Prosopographie der mittleren byzantinischen Zeit. Erste Abteilung (641-867)</i>
<i>PGM</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca (Migne)</i>
<i>PO</i>	<i>Patrologia Orientalis</i>
<i>RE</i>	<i>Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i>
<i>REB</i>	<i>Révue des Études Byzantines</i>
<i>SA</i>	<i>Scriptores Arabici in CSCO</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Scriptores Syriaci in CSCO</i>
<i>TIB</i>	<i>Tabula Imperii Byzantini</i>
<i>TM</i>	<i>Travaux et Mémoires</i>
<i>VV</i>	<i>Vizantijskij Vremeni</i>

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¹ This is the long version; the short one is unedited but it is discussed by Auzépy (1995).

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Index of Names and Places

Titles of the sources and author names (for a list see pp. 469–71) are excluded from this index, with the exception of contemporaries who are witnesses to the events they record. Common geographical names such as Africa, Asia, Syria, Constantinople, Baghdad or Romans, Arabs, Persians etc. are not included. Geographical accidents are noted. Rulers are identified, but further details about the person are given only in case of homonyms.

- Abasgia/Abasgians 41, 46, 48, 51, 97, 111, 169, 249–55, 340, 343, 363, 465, 466
- ‘Abbās (Ma’ mūn’s son) 97, 99, 148, 214, 216, 218, 222, 224, 225, 234, 239–43, 285, 309, 313–16, 329, 330, 410, 415, 417, 449, 464–6
- ‘Abbās ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib 282
- ‘Abdallāh ibn Ṭāhir 213
- ‘Abd al-Mālik (caliph) 417
- ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (emir of Cordoba) 316–23, 328, 355, 356, 413, 414, 466
- ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī 419
- ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Aḥmad 211
- ‘Abd al-Wahhāb 282
- ‘Abdūs al-Fihrī 237
- Ablabas, Simbat 253, 256
- Abraham of Tiberias 419
- Abū al-‘Amayṭar al-Sufyānī 210, 414
- Abū Ḥafṣ 206, 207, 319
- Abū Ishāq, cf. Mu’ṭasim
- Abū Ja’far (caliph) 319
- Abū Ja’far Ashnās 287–9, 291, 293, 308, 309, 312
- Abū Muslim 139, 211
- Abū Sa’īd 148, 149, 329–32, 466
- Abū Ṭālib (Muḥammad’s uncle) 282
- Abuzachar 174, 223
- Achilles 98, 429
- Adana 217–19, 224, 229, 235, 237–9, 465
- Adata (pass of Ḥadath) 89, 216, 221, 279, 287–9, 331, 332, 464
- Adramalech 85–6
- Adrianopolis 13, 51, 56
- Adriatic (sea) 321, 322, 324, 327
- Adyghs 47
- Aegean (island) 58, 71
- Aegean (sea) 21, 206, 207
- Aegina 207
- Aetios (eunuch) 126
- Aetios (strategos of the Anatolikoi) 127, 286, 294, 296, 297, 301, 303, 309
- Afshīn 112, 127, 139, 142, 174, 259, 261, 267, 287, 289–91, 293, 300, 308, 311, 330, 331, 343
- Aghberd 247, 271, 273, 274
- Aghlabids 52, 210, 211, 213, 321–3, 326, 328
- Aḥrab (Keçikalesi) 217, 240
- Akampsis (river) 249, 252
- Akropolites, Constantine 23
- Aksigoms 255
- Alania/Alan 46, 48, 49, 169, 345, 416
- Al-Aqtā’, cf. ‘Amr/‘Umar ibn ‘Abdallāh ibn Marwān al-Aqtā’
- Albaneka 15
- Albania 249, 345
- Aleppo 197
- Alexander the Great 432
- Alexandria/Alexandrian 200–202, 207, 210, 238, 367, 371, 376, 380, 401–4, 407, 464, 465
- Alexios I Komnenos 328
- ‘Alī al-Jarawī 201, 210, 211
- ‘Alī /‘Alids 209, 211, 282, 409, 412, 427
- ‘Alī ibn Hishām 238
- ‘Alī ibn Mūsā ibn Ja’far al-Riḍā 209, 210, 409–12

- Alkman 429
 Amalekites 83–7, 90
 Amalfi 433
 Amaseia 248
 Amastris 114, 166, 173, 178, 179, 288,
 345, 352
 Amatuni 142
 Amida 275
 Amīn (caliph) 181, 209, 213, 412
 Amorites 85
 ‘Amr al-Farghanī 288, 293
 ‘Amr/‘Umar ibn ‘Abdallāh ibn Marwān al-
 Aqtā‘ 50, 259, 261, 262, 286
 Anastasia (Theophilos’ daughter) 118
 Anastasios (Thomas the Slav’s son) 56, 122
 Anatolikoi (thema) 18, 34, 38, 40, 61, 65,
 78, 87, 89, 119, 127, 205, 285, 302,
 309, 463
 Anazarba 217–19, 222, 238, 465
 Ancona 324
 Andalus/Andalusian 200–208, 212, 238,
 316–21, 415, 432, 464
 Andzevatsi 98
 Ankgh 272, 273
 Ankyra 26, 181, 216, 283, 285, 287–9,
 291–3, 304, 308–10, 328, 397, 466
 Anna (Theophilos’ daughter) 118
 Anthemios (building) 115
 Antighū 217, 225, 230, 239, 240
 Antioch 25–7, 330, 331, 367, 371, 376,
 379, 380, 406, 417, 465, 466
 Antitaurus (range) 89, 216, 217, 464
 Antonios the Younger 205, 206, 457, 458
 Anzes (battle of) 112, 123, 124, 132–5,
 163, 173–8, 223, 261, 262, 286,
 288, 290–93, 297, 301, 304, 310,
 311, 330, 460, 466
 Anzitene, cf. Handzit
 Aratahan 251
 Araxes (river) 49
 Arbela/Erbil/Irbil 271
 Archimedes 434
 Ardzruni 84–6, 249
 Arethas of Patras 23, 98
 Argaiia 232
 Aristophanes 429
 Aristotle 423, 431, 443
 Arkadiopolis 56, 464
 Armeniakoi (thema) 34, 35, 40, 41, 44, 46,
 53, 64, 87, 89, 90, 100, 116, 202,
 219, 233, 248, 289, 463
 Arsaber (Theodora’s brother-in-law) 78, 165
 Arsaber (John the Grammarian’s brother)
 76–8, 80
 Arsaber (general) 15, 63, 463
 Arsamosata 92, 224, 245, 247, 249, 259,
 261, 263–5, 267, 269–76, 280, 289,
 465
 Arsania (river) 272, 273, 275
 Arshakuni/Arsakidos, Valentine 104
 Artabanos (Persian king) 189
 Asaghin 247, 271, 272
 Ashinās 215
 Ashnās, cf. Abū Ja‘far
 Ashot I Msaker 142, 245, 253, 256
 Ashot (Shaphuh Bagratuni’s son) 247, 248,
 251, 256, 258
 Assyria/Assyrian 39, 46, 84–6, 196, 271
 Astaunitis 276
 Astēl 346
 Athanasios of Trebizond 254
 Athinganoi 28, 29, 39, 49, 186, 197, 296
 Athos (mount) 369
 Attaleia 205, 206, 457, 458
 Aytākh 267
 Azerbaijan 49, 121, 139–42, 146, 147, 162,
 163, 170, 171, 211–13, 238, 249,
 250, 267, 279, 330
 Azov (sea) 352, 363
 Bābak 139, 140, 142, 145–8, 150, 151,
 153, 159, 161, 162, 164, 172, 177,
 211–13, 238, 250, 263, 266–8, 270,
 279, 289, 311, 312, 330
 Baboutzikoi 79
 Baboutzikos, Constantine 77, 111, 112,
 165, 286, 324
 Baboutzikos, Theodosios 112, 325, 326,
 353, 466
 Badhdh 211
 Bagaran 249, 253, 256, 277
 Bagarat Bagratuni of Taron 251, 252, 256,
 258, 259, 277, 289, 465
 Bagratids 80, 97, 142, 245, 249–57, 277, 289
 Balabitenene 276
 Balearics 210, 322, 327

- Balkans 20, 48, 117, 130, 160, 189, 265,
 311, 344, 363
 Baltic (sea) 349
 Banū Mūsā 447, 448
 Baradān 227
 Bardanes the Turk 15, 23, 33, 61, 63–5, 74,
 79, 89, 96, 184–8 194–6, 463
 Bardas (kaiser, Theodora's brother) 75, 111,
 122, 125, 250, 251, 259, 434, 442, 465
 Bardas (Leo V's cousin) 90
 Bardas (Leo V's father) 43, 63
 Basean 246, 248–50, 253, 255, 258, 465
 Bashīr (general) 148, 329, 330, 466
 Bashīr/Besher (renegade) 190
 Basil I (emp.) 50, 112, 432
 Basil II (emp.) 39
 Basil (patriarch of Jerusalem) 367, 371,
 376, 377
 Basil (patrician) 303
 Basil (Theodore of Edessa's nephew) 378,
 416, 418
 Basil (writer) 373, 405, 406, 418
 Basil al-Rūmī 298
 Bassoes 127, 286
 Berber 207, 210
 Bithynia 50, 198, 292, 406
 Blachernai (church, palace) 381, 445, 455
 Black Sea 114, 253, 340, 347, 349, 351,
 353, 354, 363
 Boiditzes 127, 294–7, 434
 Bonetta 89
 Bonifatius 326, 327
 Bosporos (strait) 285
 Bosporos (Crimea) 346, 363
 Boukellarioi (thema) 126, 149, 286, 292, 329
 Brindisi 321
 Bryas (palace) 444
 Bugha 111
 Bulgarians 13, 14, 17, 18, 24, 33, 48, 55,
 78, 80, 120, 130, 204, 265, 350,
 351, 353, 362, 463
 Bulgars 314, 345, 349, 362–4
 Byrseus (monastery) 115
 Byzes 56

 Canaan 85
 Cappadocia 21–3, 99, 215–18, 224–43,
 450, 464
 Carthage 326
 Caspian (sea) 211, 345, 357
 Caucasus/Caucasian 41, 46–9, 58, 77, 121,
 137, 142, 159, 160, 170–72, 251–3,
 255, 335, 464
 Chaldia (thema) 21, 41, 46, 48, 49, 246,
 247, 258, 352
 Chalisioi 347
 Chalkedon 104, 198, 323
 Charax 430
 Charles the Great 439, 448
 Charsianon 23, 91, 92, 135, 217, 219–24,
 233, 238, 278, 303, 313, 461
 Cherson 75, 114, 338, 340, 345–7, 353,
 354, 364
 Chiliokomon (plain) 175, 177, 288, 291
 Choiosphaktes, Leo 440
 Chorzane/Chorzanene 224
 Chosroes (Persian king) 190
 Chotzirōn 346
 Choualēs/Khwalis 347
 Christopher (Constantine V's son) 122
 Christopher (patriarch of Alex.) 367, 371,
 376, 401, 403
 Christopher (abba) 398
 Chrysopolis (Macedonia) 120
 Chrysopolis (Üsküdar) 115
 Chrysotriklinios (building) 445
 Cilicia/Cilician 26, 89, 149, 152, 179, 180,
 197, 215, 216, 218–26, 229–33,
 236–9, 241–3, 245, 288, 331, 332
 465, 466
 Circassians 47
 Compiègne 326, 327
 Constantine I (emp.) 160, 384
 Constantine III (emp.) 104
 Constantine IV (emp.) 190
 Constantine V (emp.) 1, 17, 18, 49, 61, 86,
 93, 98, 117, 118, 121, 122, 131,
 161, 257, 347, 380, 397, 401, 454
 Constantine VI (emp.) 25, 29, 41, 73, 80,
 103, 105, 107, 109, 116, 183, 184,
 188, 191, 193, 194, 307, 451, 464
 Constantine VII (emp.) 2, 6, 161, 221, 260,
 275, 337, 343, 356, 432, 433
 Constantine (unidentified emp.) 27
 Constantine/Symbatios (Leo V's son) 17,
 71, 103

- Constantine (Theophilos' son) 105, 121, 166, 375, 464, 465
 Constantine/Cyril 356, 358, 438
 Constantine (general) 203, 204
 Copt/Coptic 201, 210, 213
 Cordoba 201, 316–20, 328, 355, 433, 466
 Corsica 326, 327
 Crescens 198
 Crete 52, 75, 197, 200–208, 210, 212, 320–22, 464
 Crimea 114, 335, 345–7, 352–4, 363,
 Cyclades 21
 Cyprus 20, 21, 206
 Cyrus (Persian king) 156

 Dagistheus (building) 33
 Dalmatia/Dalmatian 20, 324
 Damascus 139, 197, 210, 214, 225, 237, 238, 265, 400, 401, 414, 440
 Damianos 202, 203, 206
 Danube (river) 7, 13, 51, 52, 338, 340, 344, 345, 350, 351, 354, 362, 364
 Darband 357
 Darial (pass) 48
 Dēgik' 273–6
 Degis 272, 273
 Demokritos 423
 Derjan 274
 Diabasis (plain) 55
 Digenis Akrites 95–7, 261
 Dionysios of Tell Maḥrē 88, 93, 192, 265, 328
 Dionysios the Areopagite 432
 Dioscorides 432, 433
 Distra 338
 Dnieper (river) 344, 345, 349, 351–4, 363, 466
 Dniester (river) 52, 344, 345, 349, 351
 Domitian (emp.) 189
 Don (river) 344–7, 351, 352, 354, 360
 Doros 345
 Dorylaion 283, 288, 293, 300
 Dvin 141, 142, 245, 249, 254, 256

 Ebissa 74
 Edessa 88, 90, 190, 263, 268, 269, 378, 379, 415, 416, 419, 429, 430
 Egrisi 252
 Egypt/Egyptians 41, 46, 81, 196, 197, 201, 207, 210–14, 234, 237, 238, 241, 267, 284, 287, 312, 325, 404, 421
 Eirene (empress) 41, 98, 99, 116, 126, 183–5, 188, 191, 192, 194
 Eirene (Bardanes' daughter) 15
 Eirene (patricia) 64
 Eirene (Photios' mother) 78, 165
 Eirene (Theodora's sister) 78
 Eirenoupolis 217–19, 222, 238, 465
 Elaias (monastery) 115
 Elias II (patriarch of Jerusalem) 397, 398
 Emesa 197
 Epicharmos 429
 Epiphanius 388
 Erbil, cf. Arbela
 Ethiopians 128–30
 Euclid 423, 431, 434, 435
 Eudokia (Herakleios' wife) 104
 Eudokia (Constantine V's wife) 18
 Eudokia (Basil I's wife) 112
 Eudokimos 23
 Euphemios 119, 203, 204, 213, 214, 321, 327, 464
 Euphrates (river) 78, 88, 189, 249, 269, 272–4, 313
 Euphrosyne (Constantine VI's daughter, Michael II's wife) 29, 61, 73, 74, 93, 101, 103–10, 174, 464
 Euphrosyne (Leo Skleros' daughter) 64
 Eusebios of Kaisareia 384
 Eutyches 380
 Eutychianos 19
 Eutychios (patriarch of Alex.) 26, 27
 Euthymios 29

 Faḡl ibn Sahl 209, 210
 Fathyūn 427
 Fatima 282
 Florence 433
 Florina, Theoktiste 74, 108, 109
 Forty Martyrs (church) 113, 434, 437, 454
 Forty Martyrs (lake) 299
 Frank/Frankish 112, 324–8, 349, 350, 353, 355, 432
 Fuṣṭāṭ 201, 210
 Galen 423, 431, 433

- Gastia (monastery) 108
 Gaurene 276
 Gayl (river), cf. Miuss
 Gazarenos 98
 Gazouros (lake) 34, 35, 39
 Geber, cf. Jabīr ibn Ḥayyān
 Gegham 247, 271, 273, 274
 George (Michael II's father) 94, 267
 Georgians/Iberians 41, 46, 48, 97, 111, 251–4, 259, 289, 465
 Germanikeia 331, 332
 Germanos (patriarch of Const.) 407
 Gerōn 216
 Getai 46, 51, 52, 130
 'Getthai' 129, 130
 Ghazāl 316–20, 438, 466
 Gnumi 84, 86
 Gomadzor 246, 255, 258
 Gotthia 346, 347
 Graptoi brothers 394
 Gregory, cf. Pterotos
 Gyberin 98
- Ḥadath, cf. Adata
 Hagia Sophia (church) 13, 407
 Halys (river) 112, 127, 175, 288–91, 308, 460
 Hamadhān 145, 209
 Handzit 273, 274, 276
 Ḥarrān 418
 Hārūn al-Rashīd (caliph) 88, 99, 127, 142, 181, 192, 201, 209, 215, 222, 245, 281, 307, 359, 410, 411, 413, 415, 419, 445, 450
 Hārūn ibn Yahyā 129
 Ḥasanī 410, 411
 Ḥasday ibn Shaprūt 356
 Hashemite 281–3, 412
 Hāshim ibn 'Abd Manāf 412
 Hashteank' 273
 Ḥaṣhīn 217, 240
 Hebrew, cf. Judaism
 Hedeby 353
 Hellas 21, 64
 Hellenes 443, 444
 Henry IV (French king) 15
 Herakleia 56, 217, 222, 225, 226, 231, 240, 465
- Herakleios I (emp.) 48, 66, 74, 104, 356
 Herakleios II (emp.) 104
 Heraklonas, cf. Herakleios II
 Heron of Alexandria 446, 447
 Hexaboulios, John 67
 Hezekiah 84
 Hiereia 167, 383, 386, 427
 Ḥijāz 211
 Hilduin 327, 432
 Hippokrates 423, 431
 Homer 429, 430, 443
 Hormisdas II (Persian king) 160
 Ḥunayn ibn-Ishāq 431, 433
 Hungarians (cf. Magyars) 48, 51, 344, 347, 350, 351
 Huns 46–8, 51, 52, 131, 347, 351
- Iambres 79
 Iannes 79, 96, 97
 Iberians, cf. Georgians
 Ibn al-Dāya 70
 Ibn Bayhas 210
 Ibn Kullāb 427
 Ibrāhīm (general) 174, 223
 Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī, cf. Abraham of Tiberias
 Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (caliph) 181, 210, 412, 415
 Ibrāhīm ibn Mūsā ibn Ja'far al-Ṣadiq 211
 Idrisids 210s, 322
 Ikonion 34, 299
 Ilmen (lake) 351, 352
 Indians 46, 196, 197
 Ingelheim 349, 466
 Iraq 143, 209, 211, 239, 241, 315, 409, 418
 Irbil, cf. Arbela
 Iris (river) 175, 290, 291
 Isaak Komnenos (emp.) 261, 262
 Isauria/Isaurian 17, 18, 21, 49, 80, 103, 109, 193, 347, 359, 427, 451
 Iṣfahān 139, 145, 211
 Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muṣ'ab 145, 146, 259
 Ishāq ibn Ismā'īl 251–3, 259, 465
 Italy 20, 41, 112, 119, 120, 168, 321, 324, 326, 433
 Itil 345, 358
- Jabala 233
 Jabīr ibn Ḥayyān 427

- Jacobite 28, 88, 398, 442
 Ja‘far al-Khayyāt 215
 Ja‘far ibn Dīnār 267
 Jahhāf 141
 Jāhiz 423, 424, 432, 437
 Jazīra 89, 148, 197, 211, 214, 222, 287,
 329, 364, 464
 Jebusite 86
 Jerusalem 84, 97, 367, 370, 371, 373,
 376–84, 397, 401, 406, 407, 416,
 429, 465
 Jibāl 139, 145–7, 229, 234, 238, 239, 330
 Job (patriarch of Antioch) 25–7, 367, 371,
 376, 396, 397
 John (saint) 429
 John I Tzimiskes (emp.) 398, 413
 John the Grammarian (patriarch of Const.)
 8, 17, 19, 30, 76–81, 96–8, 111,
 113, 114, 255, 340, 341, 381, 382,
 386, 400, 427, 435–7, 440, 444,
 452, 464–6
 John (patriarch of Jerus.) 370
 ‘John’ (caliph) 416
 John of Damascus 365, 367, 400, 401
 John bishop of Damietta 404
 John of Edessa 419
 John the hermit 416
 Joktan 413
 Jomah 273, 275
 Jordan (river) 197, 210, 385, 419
 Joseph (Khazar king) 356
 Judaism/Jew/Hebrew 5, 28, 39, 86, 98,
 104, 22, 228, 263, 265, 268, 297,
 297, 302, 335, 347, 355–62, 416,
 417, 419
 Julian (emp.) 407
 Justin I (emp.) 30
 Justinian I (emp.) 37, 109, 426, 358
 Justinian II (emp.) 190
- Kabardians 47
 Kabars 47, 48, 344, 357
 Kabeira (Neo-Kaisareia) 48
 Kabeiroi 46, 47
 Kachkak‘ar 247, 254
 Kaisareia 23, 215, 217, 240
 Kallistos 50, 127–30, 136
 Kalomaria (Theodora’s sister) 76, 78, 165
- Kamakha 249
 Kamateros, Petronas 75, 114, 321, 335,
 337–43, 349, 354, 358–60, 362,
 461, 465
 Karambis (cape) 353
 Karbeas 50
 Karianos (building) 33
 Karin, cf. Theodosiopolis
 Karteros/Qurtiyūs (ambassador in
 Cordoba) 318–20, 466
 Kassia 74
 Kassymatas, Antonios (patriarch of Const.)
 19, 78, 79, 81, 110, 382, 383, 397
 Katakylas 53, 89, 90
 Kavād (Persian king) 139
 Kaysum 88, 225, 265
 Kechor 254
 Keçikalesi, cf. Aḥrab
 Kephalonía (island) 202
 Kerch 345–7
 Khagtik‘, cf. Chaldia
 Khazars 8, 47–9, 51, 75, 114, 137, 161,
 249, 253, 321, 335–64, 449, 461,
 465, 466
 Khortzianē/Khordzean 224, 273, 274, 27
 Khosomakhōn 275
 Khozan 247, 271, 272, 274, 276
 Khrubat (Bulgarian khan) 363
 Khurāsān 70, 88, 95, 139, 140, 209, 211,
 213, 286, 312, 313, 345
 Khurramites 39, 88, 113, 126, 129, 131,
 135, 137, 139–63, 167, 171, 172,
 175, 177, 211, 212, 218, 238, 239,
 243 245–55, 257–9, 260, 263, 265,
 267, 275, 279, 302, 303, 329, 425,
 444, 450, 460, 462, 465, 466
 Khwalis, cf. Choualēs
 Khwarizm 344, 345, 347
 Kibyrrhaiotai 202, 204–6, 330, 457
 Kichkas 353
 Kiel 353
 Kiev, 345, 353
 Kindī 419
 Klarjeth 251
 Klimata (thema) 345, 346, 364
 Koghoberd 274
 Koinochorion 49
 Kolaver 251, 252

- Kolchis 252, 253
 Koloneia 50, 127–30, 136
 Kommagene 270, 280
 Konstans II (emp.) 104, 196
 Koron 22, 99, 215–17, 227, 230, 288, 291, 464
 Krambonitai 69
 Krateros (strategos of the Anatolikoi) 89
 Krateros (strategos of the Kibyrrhaiotai) 206
 Krateros, Theodore (strategos of the Boukellarioi) 126, 135, 136, 220, 224, 286, 292, 437
 Krenitai 115–17, 257
 Krithinos, Theodore 119, 124
 Krum (Bulgarian khan) 13, 14, 17–19, 52, 350
 Kuban (river) 48, 344, 363
 Kufā 281
 Kurdistan/Kurd 141, 170, 275
 Kūshānūsh 282
 Kyros (river) 249, 251
 Kythnos (island) 189
 Kytoros 353
 Kyzikos 232

 Lamos (river) 332
 Lausiakos (building) 459
 Lazaros (deacon) 430
 Lazika/Lazian 46, 48, 49, 252, 253
 Leo II (Abasgian king) 48, 252, 253
 Leo III (emp.) 1, 5, 20, 21, 117, 190
 Leo IV (emp.) 93, 98, 122, 184
 Leo V the Armenian (emp.) 1, 8, 13–20, 23, 24, 27–30, 33–46, 58, 61, 63–72, 77–81, 83–7, 89, 90, 93, 110, 101, 103, 106, 107, 109, 110, 112, 150, 161, 167, 183, 185, 187–9, 193–5, 251, 280, 296, 382, 450–52, 456–9, 463, 464
 Leo VI the Wise (emp.) 44
 Leo (scribon) 22, 99
 Leo (archpriest of Naples) 432
 Leo the Philosopher 78, 113, 114, 232, 233, 239, 296, 427, 434–7, 439, 443, 454
 Leontios (monk) 19
 Levi/Lāwī 296, 297
 Libadia (monastery) 107, 109
 Libya 283, 325
 Longobard 321, 324
 Lothair (Frankish king) 112, 323, 326
 Louis the Pious (Frankish emp.) 25, 41, 183, 189, 323, 324, 326, 327, 349, 350, 355, 432, 433, 466
 Louis II (Frankish king) 112
 Loulon 113, 217, 229–34, 239–41, 243, 245, 435, 465
 Lydia 54
 Lykaonia/Lykaonian 37–9, 63, 152

 Macedonia/Macedonians 1, 24, 52, 350, 351, 432, 452–4
 Madai (rebels) 259
 Maghrib 210
 Magnaura (palace) 106, 113, 434, 442, 445, 455
 Magyars (cf. Hungarians) 335, 344–7, 349, 351–5, 357, 364
 Mahdī (caliph) 70, 99
 Mahdī (saviour) 410, 412, 414
 Mājida 215, 217
 Makarios of Pelekete 50, 420
 Mālik ibn Kaydan 291–3, 309
 Mamas (mount) 232
 Mamikonian 63, 86
 Mamikonian, Musegh 141
 Ma'mūn (caliph) 8, 26, 27, 51, 52, 88, 95, 113, 142, 143, 181, 192–4, 200, 201, 208–43, 245, 265, 266, 287, 296, 311, 313–15, 319, 320, 324, 329, 363, 366, 398, 402, 409–14, 416–18, 425, 427, 431, 434, 436, 437, 443, 446–8, 450, 451, 461, 463–5
 Manazkert 137, 141, 249
 Manbij 313
 Mangana (quarter) 116
 Mangoup 346
 Maniakes, Constantine 111–13
 Mani/Manicheans 46, 49–51, 129, 415
 Manšūr (caliph) 117, 209
 Manšūr (family) 400, 401
 Manšūr ibn Sarjūn 401
 Manuel the Armenian 8, 40, 61, 71, 75–7, 79, 81, 83–101, 110, 111, 125,

- 132–6, 148, 162, 163, 174, 176,
177, 190, 208, 216, 218, 223, 255,
265, 287, 290, 303, 315, 341, 415,
425, 451, 460, 462–4
- Maria (Theophilos' daughter) 115, 118–23,
464, 465
- Maria of Amnia (Constantine V's wife)
103, 105, 107
- Marinos (Theodora's father) 74
- Marinos (Herakleios' brother) 74
- Marj al-Usqf 287–9
- Markellai (battle) 80
- Markos of Ephesos 323
- Martina (Herakleios' wife) 74, 104
- Martinakios, Anastasios 112
- Marwān 356
- Maṣṣīṣa, cf. Mopsuestia
- Maṭamir 225, 226, 230, 240, 287, 288, 290,
465
- Maurice (emp.) 88, 190, 27
- Mayyāfāriqīn 282
- Mazdakism/Mazdean 139, 211, 419
- Melissenoi 79, 81, 127, 286
- Melissenos, Michael 18
- Melissenos Kassiteras, Theodotos
(patriarch of Const.) 14, 18, 19,
78–80, 110
- Melitene 50, 78, 89, 216, 218, 221, 224,
245, 247, 249, 259–67, 269, 270,
273, 276, 277, 280, 286, 288, 289,
332, 450, 461, 464, 465
- Melkites 8, 31, 365–7, 370, 371, 375,
377–84, 394–401, 403, 405–8, 417,
418, 420, 424, 425, 429, 430, 439,
442, 452, 463, 465
- Menander 429
- Mesembria 18
- Mesopotamia (cf. Jazīra) 39, 85, 148, 190,
329, 331, 420
- Methodios (patriarch of Const.) 29, 42, 69,
254, 400, 432
- Methodios (apostle of the Slavs) 438
- Metskert 247, 271–4
- Michael I Rhangabe (emp.) 13, 17, 19, 44,
49, 64, 65, 67, 75, 463
- Michael II of Amorion (emp.) 8, 11, 15, 24,
25, 27–30, 33, 35–46, 49, 53–8, 61,
63–79, 81, 89, 90, 92–4, 99, 100,
101, 103–5, 107, 109, 110, 121,
122, 125, 150, 159–61, 174, 183,
185, 186, 188, 189, 191, 192–5,
199, 200, 202, 208, 224, 265, 280,
320, 321, 343, 355, 360, 383, 401,
402, 407, 432, 435, 450, 452,
456–8, 463, 464
- Michael III (emp.) 1, 39, 67, 68, 75, 76,
113, 115, 119, 122, 123, 125,
174–6, 191, 232, 248, 254, 306,
317, 355, 403, 405, 416, 435, 443,
450, 452, 454
- Michael (bishop of Ephesos) 407
- Michael the Sabaite 417
- Michael Synkellos 394, 429
- Michael (tourmarches) 22, 99
- Minkajūr 330, 331
- Miuss (river) 274
- Mokilos (mount) 232
- Monocherares, cf. 'Amr/'Umar ibn
'Abdallāh ibn Marwān al-Aqtā'
- Mopsuestia 148, 217–19, 222, 224, 235,
329, 465, 466
- Morocharzanioi 79
- Moses/Mosaic 28, 79, 86, 360, 361, 390,
402, 466
- Mōsmār 193
- Mousele, Alexios 114–24, 166, 168, 172,
176, 219, 257, 321, 451, 460, 465,
466
- Mousele, Theodosios 116
- Mu'āwiya (caliph) 196, 410, 414
- Muḥammad (prophet) 412, 430
- Muḥammad ibn Ḥumayd 212, 213
- Mush 275
- Mu'taṣim (caliph) 2, 26, 27, 28, 51, 145,
181, 213, 214, 224, 225, 233,
237–40, 242, 243, 245, 253, 256,
259, 260, 263–8, 277, 279–316,
319, 321, 328–33, 350, 355, 359,
360, 396, 397, 402, 403, 413, 425,
444, 449, 451, 460, 465, 466
- Mutawakkil (caliph) 94, 402, 403
- Mu'tazz (caliph) 416
- Mu'wayad 416
- Myron 92, 93, 100
- Nabouzardan 84

- Naples/Neapolitan 321, 328
 Naṣr ibn Shabath 83–90, 208, 211–13
 Naṣr the Khurramite 39, 134, 137, 140,
 142, 145–52, 155, 161–3, 167, 169,
 172, 176, 177, 179, 180, 263, 303,
 329, 330, 462, 464–6
 Naxos (island) 21
 Nazianzos 217, 287, 288
 Nebouchadnezzar 84
 Neo-Kaisareia 48, 49
 Nero (emp.) 189–91
 Nestorios/Nestorian 314, 380, 415, 430,
 442
 Nikaia/Nikaian 1, 23, 288, 293, 366, 380,
 383, 386, 388, 405, 452
 Nikephoros I (emp.) 23, 27, 33, 38, 44, 63,
 64, 184, 185, 222, 463
 Nikephoros II Phokas (emp.) 398, 413
 Nikephoros (patriarch of Const.) 13–19,
 23, 29, 30, 84–6, 388, 400, 458,
 463
 Nikephoros (Constantine V's son) 122
 Niketas (patrician) 108
 Nikolaos Mystikos (patriarch of Const.)
 399
 Novgorod 351
 Nu'aym ibn Ḥammād 411
 Nyssa 287–9, 293

 Olbianos 53, 89, 90
 Oleg 353
 Olympos (mount) 199
 Omurtag (Bulgarian khan) 55, 204
 Onogouroi 347
 Ooryphas 111, 112, 127, 179
 Opsikion (thema) 53, 89, 90, 119, 456
 Orosius 432, 433
 Osrhoene 268
 Ounoi, cf. Huns
 Oxeai (quarter) 156, 159

 Paghin 272, 274, 276
 Paghmatun 272–4, 276
 Palermo 321
 Palestine 85, 97, 197, 283, 284, 326, 365,
 394, 395, 398, 401, 416, 418
 Palines, cf Paghmatun
 Pamphylia 38

 Panion 56
 Pankratios (John the Grammarian's father)
 79, 80, 440
 Pankratios of Abasgia 169
 Paphlagonia/Paphlagonian 74, 75, 98, 105,
 114, 175, 280, 338, 340, 352
 Paris 325, 432
 Patzinakia/Pecheneg 338–40
 Paul (St.) 49, 429, 432
 Paulikianoi 49–51
 Pechenegs, cf. Patzinakia
 Pelekete (monastery) 128, 130
 Peloponnesos 65, 202
 Peter (St.) 429
 Peter (bishop of Egypt) 380
 Peter of Atroa 199, 456
 Peter of Sicily 49
 Petronas (Theodora's brother) 74, 92, 93,
 111, 125, 456
 Phadalar 196
 Philip I (French king) 328
 Philippopolis 350
 Philomelion 185, 187, 195, 299
 Phokas (emp.) 66, 78, 165, 190
 Photeinos 202–6
 Photios (patriarch of Const.) 18, 78, 125,
 126, 366, 399, 405, 408, 427, 442,
 443
 Phrygia 78, 167
 Pidra 39
 Pisidia 38, 39, 152
 Plato 423, 429, 431, 434
 Polybios 160
 Polybotos 288, 299
 Podandos 217, 231, 242, 243
 Pontos/Pontic 20, 113, 249, 254, 258, 345,
 363
 Pousgouse (lake) 34
 Prinkipo (island) 103, 107, 198
 Prote (island) 71
 Psellos, Michael 14
 Pterotos, Gregory 15, 55, 58, 71, 90
 Ptolemy 423, 431, 434, 440, 442
 Pulcheria (Theophilos' daughter) 108, 118
 Pyramos (river) 217

 Qaysites 141, 142, 210, 211
 Qinnasrin 197

- Qurayshī 419
 Qurra, cf. Koron
 Qusta ibn Lūqā 430

 Rabṭʿa 264, 270
 Rapsakes 84, 85
 Rawḥ, Antonios 419
 Rhetech 347
 Richard I the Lionheart 261
 Robert Giscard 328
 Rodandos 217
 Romanopolis 273, 275, 276
 Romanos I Lakapenos (emp.) 161, 275,
 359, 432
 Rome 41, 189, 190, 433, 380
 Rus 8, 335, 344, 345, 349–55, 360–62,
 364, 451, 466
 Rustamids 210, 322

 Sabaites 380
 Sabas (monastery) 97, 378, 379, 416, 418
 Sabas (Muslim leader) 324
 Sabirs 47, 48
 Sahak son of Ismael 247
 Sahak of Siwnikʿ 142
 Saint Auxentios (mount) 232
 Saint Catherine (monastery) 404
 Saint Denis (abbey) 325, 327, 432
 Saint Mamas (quarter) 13, 167
 Saint Mark (church) 445
 Saint Zacharias (monastery) 199
 Salaberina 240
 Salaghūs 230
 Sāmarrā 111, 139, 162, 177, 227, 266, 268,
 281, 282, 295, 296, 298, 302, 303,
 305, 310, 312, 314, 331, 444, 445,
 449–51
 Samos (island) 232
 Samosata 88, 249, 269, 279, 280
 Sardinia 210, 322, 327
 Sarkel 338–45, 354, 360, 465
 Sarasar 85
 Saros (river) 217
 Saruj 88
 Sasima 240
 Sassanids 139, 160, 190, 445
 Satyros (monastery) 444
 Sawāda 141, 142

 Scandinavia 349, 351
 Scythian 186
 Sebasteia 221, 288, 289
 Seleukeia 330
 Sennacherim 84–6
 Sergios (patriarch of Jerus.) 400, 401, 405
 Sergios (envoy) 196
 Sergios (Photiosʿ brother) 78, 166
 Sergios Bahīrā 412, 413
 Sergios Niketiates 75
 Sergios Tychikos 49, 50
 Sevan (lake) 249, 274
 Severos 380
 Shammāsiyya 227
 Shamuna 264
 Shapohr 196
 Shapuh Bagratuni 248, 276
 Sicily 7, 119, 121, 124, 203, 204, 210, 213,
 321–3, 326, 327, 464, 466
 Simbat (sparapet) 142
 Sinān 216, 217, 230
 Sinope 114, 134, 148, 151, 154, 159, 162,
 173–9, 288, 292, 329, 353
 Siwnikʿ 142
 Sklaviniās 23
 Skleros, Leo 61, 64, 65, 196
 Slavs 46, 48, 51, 52, 183, 345, 349, 352,
 356, 361–4, 438
 Smyrna 89
 Socrates 429
 Sogdiana 142, 281
 Sophene 273, 274, 276
 Sophia (Theodoraʿs sister) 77, 111, 165
 Sophronios (patriarch of Alex.) 401–5, 430
 Sozopetra 92, 120, 145–7, 149, 175, 222,
 229, 245, 247, 257, 259, 260,
 262–82, 300–304, 332, 341, 350,
 362, 364, 380, 449, 460, 461, 465
 Spektas, John 19
 Sper 113, 247–50, 258–60, 277, 343, 465
 Staurakios (emp.) 44, 463
 Staurakios (protospatharios) 64
 Staurakios (eunuch) 98, 126
 Stephen (officer) 458
 Stephen the Sabaites 398
 Stephen the Younger 131
 Sufyānī 210, 410, 413, 414, 417
 Sundus 215, 217

- Swedes 349, 351
 Sylaiou 19, 79
 Symbatios, cf. Constantine (Leo V's son)
 Symbatios (Bardas' son-in-law) 111
 Symeon of Bulgaria 160
- Tabaristan 211
 Taman (peninsula) 347
 Tamatarcha 345, 347
 Tanais (river, cf. Don) 338, 340, 351
 Taormina 322
 Taranto 324, 328
 Tarasios (patriarch of Const.) 18, 400
 Taron 249, 277, 289
 Tarsos 215, 217–19, 222, 224, 230–32, 235, 279, 287, 288, 298, 465
 Tatta (lake) 299
 Tatzates 98, 99
 Taurus (range) 217, 219
 Terentius Maximus 189
 Thekla (Michael II's wife) 63, 64, 73, 79, 103–5, 109, 464
 Thekla (Theophilos' daughter) 118, 123, 464
 Theodora (Justinian I's wife) 358
 Theodora (Theophilos' wife) 1, 29, 61, 70, 72–9, 83, 92, 98, 100, 105, 108, 109, 111, 114, 123, 125, 126, 148, 162, 165, 166, 168, 174, 250, 251, 253, 286, 332, 403, 405, 416, 417, 442, 449, 451–4, 456, 464
 Theodore (patriarch of Jerusalem) 397
 Theodore Abū Qurra 365, 402, 403, 418, 419, 429
 Theodore of Edessa 378–80, 383, 405, 415, 416, 419
 Theodore Stoudites 15, 29, 30, 54, 64, 89, 93, 103, 112, 198, 199, 377, 381, 399, 452
 Theodoric the Great 160
 Theodosia (Leo V's wife) 15, 63, 93, 463
 Theodosiopolis 117, 118, 247, 249, 250, 253, 255–60, 275, 277, 343, 465
 Theodosios II (emp.) 252, 442
 Theodosios II (Abasgian king) 252
 Theodosios (Maurice's son) 190
 Theodosios of Alexandria (grammarian) 403
 Theodosios (metrop. of Chalkedon) 323
 Theodosios the Stylite 416
 Theodote (Constantine VI's wife) 103
 Theodotos, cf. Melissenos Kassiteras
 Theoktiste, cf. Florina
 Theoktistos 67, 68, 254, 435, 466
 Theophanes (spatharios) 323
 Theophilos (emp.) *passim*
 Theophilos of Edessa 430
 Theophobos 8, 92, 113, 120–24, 126, 132–7, 140, 141, 145, 149, 152–80, 194, 219, 223, 245, 248, 250, 251, 259, 293, 303, 329, 450, 460, 462, 465, 466
 Thessalonike 113, 232, 350, 436
 Thomas the Armenian 33–6, 39, 64, 185–8, 193–6, 462
 Thomas the Slav 8, 11, 24–9, 35, 36, 39–59, 64, 66–8, 71, 73, 74, 78, 81, 89, 90, 98, 101, 103, 122, 137, 150, 159, 181, 183–200, 202, 204–8, 212, 213, 236, 260, 335, 343, 360, 394, 425, 448, 450, 451, 456–8, 462–4
 Thrace 13, 24, 51, 52, 54–6, 58, 59, 117, 204, 205, 350, 353, 362
 Thrakesianoi (thema) 90
 Tiber (river) 407
 Tiberios (Justinian II's son) 190
 Tiberios (Constantine IV's son) 190
 Tiflis 111, 137, 251, 253–5, 259, 465
 Tigris (river) 227, 249, 273, 416
 Titus (emp.) 189
 T'laberd 273, 274, 276
 Tmutarakan 347
 Transoxiana 139
 Trebizond 248, 249, 253, 254
 Treveris 324, 326, 327
 Tsmu 272–6
 Turk/Turkish 47, 48, 132, 281, 286, 287, 290, 291, 307, 311–14, 351, 360, 448, 451, 466
 Tyana 215, 217, 225, 226, 230, 231, 240–43, 245, 287, 288, 465
 'Ubaydallāh ibn al-Sarī 201, 210, 211
 'Ujayf ibn 'Anbasa 215, 230, 233, 234, 238–40, 264, 266, 267, 270
 'Uqayl 88

- Umayyads 139, 210, 241, 282, 316–20,
323, 328, 356, 410, 413–16
- Urbeli 247, 271
- Urgench 345
- Urmia (lake) 249
- Utica 326
- Vanand 247, 248, 250–59, 277, 465
- Vandals 46, 51, 52
- Varangians 39, 335
- Venice 41, 112, 324, 325, 353, 466
- Versinikia (battle) 13
- Vikings 127
- Viriatus 457
- Visigoths 322
- Vitellius (emp.) 189
- Volga (river) 344, 345, 347, 349, 352, 356,
362–4
- Volga Bulgars cf. Bulgars
- Wandū, cf. Boiditzes
- Wādī Aqargas (river) 149
- Wādī al-Jawr (river) 298
- Wāthiq (caliph) 94, 333, 411, 450
- Xerxes (Persian king) 53
- Yaḥyā ibn-Akhtam 225, 240
- Yaḥyā al-Munayqila 316, 318
- Yazīd ibn Usayd 117
- Yemen 211
- Zacharias (notary) 54
- Zainab 282
- Zechoi 46, 48
- Zeno (building) 33
- Zibaṭra/Zubaṭra, cf. Sozopetra
- Zoroastrism 139, 211
- Zosimas 19
- Zurayq 213
- Zuṭṭ 197

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